

INA BAWDEN

in
honour
bound

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IN HONOUR BOUND is the exciting and tautly written story of a hero who fell, not among thieves, but among his own friends. Johnny Prothero has everything. He was brought up in the closed, bright world of influence and wealth, and nourished on the old-fashioned virtues of duty, loyalty and courage. Up to the grim point at which this story opens, his life has perfectly suited him. He has had a splendid war, has made a good marriage, and his future seems laid out invitingly before him like a clean map—yet, in the first scene of this book, he is standing in the dock accused of an ignominious crime. Is it Johnny or the times that are out of joint? This is a penetrating and gripping study of a man who had everything except the ability to grub in the squalid backyard of the 1950's; a study of the damage a man does to himself and to others in the struggle to adapt himself to a post-war, expense-account world for which his upbringing has not fitted him.

Nina Bawden's previous novels have been highly praised: 'Her undeniable strength,' wrote a critic in *The Spectator*, 'lies in her closely woven, smoothly readable prose, the eye for character, the compassion.' In this, her finest novel, these qualities are richly in evidence. The story, with its wide range of characters and varied scenes in London and the Home Counties, is exceptionally well developed and mounts steadily in interest and tension to a superbly ironical conclusion.

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By the same Author

WHO CALLS THE TUNE
THE ODD FLAMINGO
CHANGE HERE FOR BABYLON
THE SOLITARY CHILD
DEVIL BY THE SEA
JUST LIKE A LADY

In Honour Bound

NINA BAWDEN



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Men do not become what by nature they are meant to be, but what society makes them. The generous feelings and high propensities of the soul are, as it were, shrunk up, seared, violently wrenched and amputated, to fit us for our intercourse with the world, something in the manner that beggars maim and mutilate their children to make them fit for their future situation in life.

HAZLITT

I

It was hot in Court Number Four. Prosecuting Counsel yawned, his Junior played cat's cradle with a piece of red string hidden under the table, like a boy during a dull lesson in school. Counsel for the defence, ponderously on his feet, spoke of a good war record. The Judge thought of his son, dead over the Ruhr, and looked at the accused: John Prothero, ex-Squadron-Leader, D.S.O., D.F.C., and bar.

He was pale, attentive, politely bewildered like a man who has come to the wrong party. Earlier, he had been an excellent witness, clear, concise and, the Judge would have sworn it, truthful. Now he was listening with an air of embarrassment to the things Counsel was saying on his behalf. For the first time that morning his eyes wandered: he glanced across the court at his wife, a pretty, keyed-up young woman in a blue hat, and smiled.

That smile, brief, no more than a quizzical apology, arrested the Judge's attention. No man in his situation could smile like that, in just that unaffected, intimate way, unless he were buoyed up by a very special brand of confidence. Not a brash pretence, not even the basic confidence of money, but something much rarer, an innocent expectancy, a lack of doubt. This was the kind of man, the Judge thought, that you couldn't talk to for five minutes without scenting all the advantages of his closed, cosy world, the expensive preparation for life, the assurances, the promises, the *certainty*. Watching Prothero, the Judge felt no curiosity—nothing

surprised him any more—but he did feel an unexpected little rush of pity. A man like this would find it difficult to believe in any kind of final disaster.

The Judge stirred, sighed. He had come a long way to his seat in this stuffy court, fought hard for it, waited too long, and paid, in the end, a little too much for it, so that now his only emotional indulgence was the pain he felt for his dead boy. Even pity flicked him lightly as a hair on the throat. He folded his veined hands in his lap and listened to Counsel, but without much attention. He wanted no more evidence of the tiresome heroics of men. Courage and honour were words: he was concerned with facts. And not just with facts, but with the imperfect instrument of law. He leaned back against the smooth, hard wood, closed his eyes and ground his weapon sharp.

The world, his mother used to say, had been made on a Monday, a phrase that had a sharp ring of truth in the brown, urban street by the railway line where the dust and soot seeped under the door and through the ill-fitting windows and where Monday was D-day in a long battle, first to pay the rent and then to keep the house clean. His mother had not been complaining, though. Like the Judge, she had a stoic, Victorian belief in the dignity of labour: they were both willing volunteers in a world most people are conscripted to. The Judge smiled faintly. Here was a young man whose world had been made on a Sunday. . . .

Looking up timidly beneath the blue hat, Mary Prothero saw the old man smile and thought he looked kind. She had a remarkable gift for hope. She sat neatly, legs folded gently together, ankle to ankle, knee to knee, still as a princess on an Egyptian tomb. Only her eyes moved; from the Judge to Counsel, to Johnny. He was leaning forward, his chin cupped in a long, brown hand that had a signet ring on the fourth finger. Her expression mirrored his bewilderment and more: her face was suddenly shocked, blind, almost stupid with disbelief. Like the Judge, Mary Prothero had come a long

way but, unlike him, she had retained her capacity for wonder.

* * *

In the early summer of 1944 she had gone to live with a woman called Ames in a mining town in South Wales. Mary was a schoolgirl then, a Londoner who had lived in the valley since the outbreak of war: when the grandmother who had cared for her died suddenly of a stroke, the billeting officer sent her to the Ames's house and told her she was lucky to get such a good home.

Mary believed him. She was seventeen and nine months old, credulous, expectant—not innocent, exactly, but as trusting as a strong, healthy child who has never been hurt. She was no match at all for Mrs. Ames who knew no higher good than her own proud ignorance and never doubted the wickedness of other people. Her father had been a green-grocer and her husband a civil servant: there was a presentation silver salver on the sideboard in the dining-room inscribed from his colleagues at the Board of Trade. Mrs. Ames had never got over the social elevation her marriage had brought her. Her only sister had married a jobbing builder and Mrs. Ames never entertained or visited her though she sometimes sent parcels of old clothes and once, when a letter arrived to say her youngest niece had poliomyelitis, she replied with a postal order for fifteen shillings. She often told Mary, proudly, how fond she had been of Dora when they were girls together—she was one of those people who regard the bestowal of affection as a gift of extraordinary munificence—but she was too powerfully conscious of the dignity of her dead husband's position to do more.

Mary was conscious of it, too. She grieved for her grandmother whom she had deeply loved, but fear was sharper by now than grief. The old woman's death, sudden and horrifying, frightened her in dreams. Nothing was permanent. So she was comforted by the dark solidity of Mrs. Ames's house

and the awful walnut furniture that had belonged to Mr. Ames's father who had owned half a small coal mine. She was prepared to be comforted by Mrs. Ames and impulsively ready to be grateful; in fact, for the first few months she was grateful to the point of sycophancy. She admired everything, even the grisly picture of a large, brown dog mouthing a gory pheasant that hung in the drawing-room. She was genuinely excited by her room which was twice the size of the one she had shared with her grandmother who had rented two rooms in a miner's cottage, and had half the amount of furniture, all of it ugly, but solid and well polished. There was a reading lamp on the desk, curtains that opened and closed on a pulley and a fitted brown carpet on the floor. She believed she was a lucky girl and asked no more of Mrs. Ames than the pride of being connected with her house, which was fortunate because Mrs. Ames had nothing else to offer.

Occasionally they sat after supper in the drawing-room, by the light of one standard lamp so heavily shaded by a frame covered in dark, Japanese silk that the lofty yellow ceilings and the distant corners of the Turkey-carpeted floor were hidden in black shadow. If she was in a good mood, Mrs. Ames would sit upright, skirt taut over bulging knees, head erect above the great, jutting shelf of her bosom and preside with baleful solemnity over certain set subjects: the ingratitude of the young; the ingratitude, particularly, of Dora who had betrayed her sister's affection by marrying beneath her; Mary's carelessness in stumping upstairs in her outdoor shoes and how it showed what sort of home she came from; her own, startling beauty as a young girl and how she had just washed her long, heavy hair on the day that Mr. Ames came into the greengrocer's shop to buy a pound of apples for his mother; the vulgarity of sex; the disgusting filth that was published in modern novels; the ingratitude of the working classes; the sanctity of Mr. Churchill and the importance of regular habits. At the end of each item she

tossed back her head and drew in her breath with a curious, angry hiss, at the same time reaching out a plump, ringed hand to the biscuit barrel.

It was the signal for Mary to murmur agreement. She learned, early on, that it was unwise to do anything else: there were too many ways in which a spiteful, middle-aged woman could humiliate a younger one. One day, set off by a mild difference of opinion at breakfast, Mrs. Ames had made a terrible scene about a spot of blood she claimed to have found on the bathroom mat. Her attack had a coarse gusto.

'I thought you were a nice girl,' she had said. 'A nice girl from a nice home. Such a thing has never happened in my house before. *Not in all my married life.*' Her black, Welsh eyes bulged, her voice rose on an absurd note of tragic indignation.

Mary was shocked, partly because of the subject but chiefly because Mrs. Ames, for some inexplicable reason, was telling a lie. She was not a prim girl, but she was at the age when you regard small sins with a serious moral attention. 'I'm sorry,' she faltered and then went on more firmly. 'But you must have made a mistake.' She hesitated, blushing. 'I mean—it's not possible, just now.'

Mrs. Ames was inflamed. She cried hoarsely, 'That's enough. I won't have indecency. Just see you're more careful in future, *if* you please.' Her chins trembled. 'I'm only telling you for your own good, Mary. Suppose Frederick had been here!'

* * *

Frederick was her only son and her God. He was not in the Forces because he had a deformed hip, the result of rheumatic fever when he was a little boy. Mrs. Ames regarded this misfortune as a form of divine intervention for Frederick was away at college, preparing to go into the Church.

He came home in June when the university term ended.

The day before, his mother had been to the hairdresser and when his taxi drew up, she was waiting on the steps, her hair in stiff corrugations, her cheeks powdered like a clown's. She flung her arms round Frederick like a young girl greeting her lover.

Hovering in the background, Mary could not help a feeling of disappointment. Frederick was fat, he wore glasses, his tow-coloured hair receded at the temples and he had a jutting lower lip like his mother. Glowing and vivacious, Mrs. Ames led him into the drawing-room where tea was laid on a low table. Rations were difficult, but there was thin bread lavishly spread with the week's butter, a plate of drop scones and three kinds of cake. Frederick rubbed his hands together. 'By Jove, Mummy,' he cried. 'Scones for tea.'

He seized his mother round her thick waist. 'Oh Rumpy-foo, rumpy-foo,' he sang, twirling her round and smacking a kiss on her cheek. Mrs. Ames simpered, one hand to her hair. Mary stared at her feet and wondered if she should leave the room.

But Frederick turned. 'You must be Mary,' he said. He crossed the room, panting a little after his exertions and smiling. He had a ready, practised smile. He took Mary's hand and looked deeply into her eyes. 'I'm glad to meet you, Mary. I hope we will be'—a long, significant pause—'good friends.' Although he was not handsome, Mary was flattered. It was kind of him to seem to be interested in her.

The interest did not flag. During the next ten days, Frederick encouraged her to talk about her school, her family, her plans for the future, and if his questions were simply excuses to talk about himself, Mary was still disarmed. They went for long walks over the mountains and Frederick talked. Like his mother, he had several standard topics: poetry; God; the time he had lost his faith; how he had found it again riding in a bus down the East India Dock Road and—this was his favourite—the rottenness of the way some of the chaps he knew talked about girls.



By the end of the week Mary was used to Frederick's queer voice which was high and nasal and had a monotonous singsong quality as if he were already ordained and chanting evensong. Because he was kind and ridiculous and charming, she persuaded herself that she liked plump men and that a balding forehead was distinguished. She also felt that she was much older than he and that he needed protection.

* * *

One Sunday evening, the telephone rang while Mary and Frederick were washing the dishes after supper. Frederick answered it. Mary heard him say loudly, 'Yes, of course. How simply marvellous.' Then he put the receiver down and went to speak to his mother. Mary could hear the tone of their voices, though not what was said: Frederick's arguing and pacifying, his mother's raised and querulous. She wondered, as she dried the plates, why Mrs. Ames was angry.

Then Frederick came back into the kitchen and said, 'What, have you finished already?' He was rubbing his hands together, a thing he did when he was nervous or excited. 'That was a friend of mine on the telephone. A man called Johnny Prothero. He's coming to stay tomorrow.'

His happiness glowed like a victory beacon. Though he tried to sound matter-of-fact, his eyes were exultant and his mouth kept twitching in a shy, give-away grin.

Johnny Prothero had been at school with him. (Mrs. Ames had told Mary at least twenty times what school Frederick had been to, emphasizing the name in an awestruck voice as if, by sending him there, she had virtually wangled him a passport to heaven.) 'We ran into each other in Piccadilly Circus, of all places. Of course he'd forgotten *me* but I remembered *him*. I'd always admired him tremendously,' Frederick said innocently and Mary felt a stab of patronage and pity. How like Frederick to accept so humbly the fact that he was bound to be passed over.

He perched on the kitchen table, hands tucked under plump thighs. Johnny was really a splendid chap, older than he was—he had been Captain of cricket and the School's champion swimmer when Frederick was a bullied fat boy with warts on his hands. 'He was a wonderful diver. He could dive anyhow, a jack-knife, a somersault . . . he wasn't afraid of anything. He used to stand on the top board and laugh.'

Mary smiled: Frederick was afraid of heights, afraid of falling, of horses, of dentists. . . . The whole of childhood must have presented a face of unalterable physical menace. One summer, the School had gone camping in the Lakes and Frederick was in Johnny's section. He had seen Frederick's white, beaded face on an innocuous rock scramble; the next day, without comment, he had offered to teach him to fish. The kindness was engraved on Frederick's memory.

The summer had ended in war. Johnny had gone into the Air Force. He was a bomber pilot; early in the war he had won his D.F.C. dive-bombing a bridge in an old Fairy Battle, later he had been 'rested' for a year in a night-fighter squadron and later still had joined one of the crack squadrons that had broken the Mohne and Eider dams. Frederick had one great and rare virtue; he could admire men whose virtues he did not share. 'He's the sort of chap you really can look up to,' he said, glowing.

Listening to him, Mary was vaguely embarrassed. She said, 'Anyone can be brave. Courage is a kind of ignorance really.' It was something she had read somewhere.

'Oh, I don't think so, Mary,' Frederick said and looked troubled for a moment, as if she had spoiled some of his pleasure in his friend.

But he could not be cast down for long. He spent the rest of that evening and the next morning in a fever of activity, arranging the room where Johnny was to sleep, lugging out the ugly furniture and substituting less hideous pieces from his own room, hanging a Van Gogh print on the wall where

the sunlight would catch it and hurrying down to the town to buy Algerian sherry—it was the time when there was nothing else to buy—a store of new paperbacks and several packets of Senior Service, the cigarettes Johnny had been smoking when they met in Piccadilly Circus.

All this fussy expectancy soured his mother. Hemmed in on the landing while Frederick was trying, with Mary's help, to manœuvre a heavy chest from one room to another, she grumbled on a low, angry note, 'Fuss, fuss, fuss. Anyway, I'd like to know what's brought your *friend* running down here in such a hurry.'

Frederick gave her a glance from his pale-marble eyes that was long, hard and slightly sad. 'I invited him when we met a couple of months ago. I didn't mention it then because I didn't think he'd come.'

Mrs. Ames sighed dramatically. 'Well,' she said, 'if you expect *me* to roll out the red carpet, you're very much mistaken.'

* * *

For Mary, this faint suggestion of visiting royalty set the tone for the evening. Johnny drove up to the house in his old, white Delage and entered as if to trumpets blowing. For a little while after his arrival, Frederick's nervousness increased to a pitch of tense unhappiness. He tripped over the furniture, glanced round the room with distraught eyes and asked Johnny three times whether he really wanted to stand, whether he wouldn't really prefer a comfortable chair.

'This is absolutely *fine*, old man,' Johnny said.

He leaned against the mantelpiece, beneath that terrible oil painting, a glass of sherry in his hand. His face, smiling, was narrow-boned with a beaky nose and a small, fair moustache—a rather harsh, military appearance that was redeemed from ordinariness by a pair of remarkably shaped eyes, almost perfect ellipses and a pale gold in colour, which

somehow suggested personal courage, natural authority and a fine, magnanimous way of doing things. It was not a tough or swashbuckling face but in a curious way it made the Air Force blue seem something of an anachronism, as if he should have been wearing the uniform of a cleaner and more chivalrous war, when gentlemen, waving their sabres, charged on horseback to death or victory.

He was very polite, not stilted, but with that graceful ease of manner that makes so many upper-class young men act like old ones. Between his charm—which was effortless, a kind of beautiful pleasure in himself—and the confusion of handing out sherry, an easier atmosphere established itself. Johnny struck just the right note with Mrs. Ames and made a number of harmless little jokes clearly taken out of a drawer labelled for your friend's mother. He had a week's leave and was due to spend the rest of it with a naval friend who had a 'place' in North Wales. Mary had a vision of *Tatler* photographs: Squadron-Leader Prothero caught enjoying a joke with the Lady Angela Something wearing white organdie and seed pearls. Mrs. Ames was impressed and amused, almost certainly against her will, for she thought it a degrading weakness to find anyone likeable. Several times she broke into an outburst of kittenish giggling, her big, jellied breasts shuddering and her gross black eyes flirting obscenely with each young man in turn.

Only Frederick remained uncomfortable. He sat in a rigid, unnatural position on the edge of his chair, watching Johnny tread this gay little measure with his mother. When Mrs. Ames went into the kitchen, there was a pause. It endured miserably. Mary followed Mrs. Ames to help her serve up the blackened corpse of beef that served as a celebration feast in her household.

As she came back to the drawing-room to announce dinner, Frederick was saying in a harsh, complaining voice, 'But it really is too bad. I thought you were going to stay a week, at least.'

A little apprehensive, Mary stood silently in the doorway and waited for them to notice her.

'I'm awfully sorry.' Johnny sounded baffled as if he had apologized more than once already. 'I honestly did think I'd made it clear on the telephone. I suppose the line was too *wretchedly* bad. Actually, I was due at Julian's a couple of days ago but his leave was postponed at the last minute. It should be rather fun,' he added tactlessly; though of course there was no reason why he should have thought tact necessary. 'He's promised me some shooting. Only rabbits, of course.'

Frederick's neck reddened, though his face remained pale. He looked just like his mother when she was spoiling for a row. 'I'm afraid I can't offer you any glamorous pursuits,' he said absurdly. There was a despairing bitterness in his voice that seemed to be due to something more than simple annoyance because his friend was only filling in time with him. He went on pettishly, 'I never understood why you didn't join the Navy like Julian. I would have thought you would have found it more socially acceptable than the R.A.F.'

Mary held her breath, expecting an outburst from Johnny. She thought it a fearful insult to accuse anyone of snobbery. But he just said mildly, 'Oh, I don't know. My people aren't naval, you know. Of course my grandfather was pretty fed up when I didn't go into the Army. But the R.A.F.'s all right.' He caught sight of Mary and stood up, adding lightly, 'Some of them are quite decent chaps, you know.'

He looked rather pleased with himself for seeing this remark was amusing and smiled, though his eyes rested on Frederick with faint perplexity.

'The ghastly thing about you,' Frederick shouted, 'is that you only pretend to think that's funny.' He got up in a rush, eyes glaring, bit savagely on the new pipe he had bought that morning, jerked it manfully upright and dropped it out of his mouth. It clattered onto the brass fender and broke.

'Damn,' said Frederick and looked as if he might be going to cry. Some of the pieces had rolled under the armchair and he grovelled after them, his fat, khaki-coloured bottom in the air. Though she was sorry for him, Mary wanted to laugh. She wondered why he was so anxious to pick a quarrel.

It wasn't until years later that she understood.

* * *

After dinner they drove in Johnny's car—he had plenty of petrol, saved up over several leaves—to a small fishing hotel in the hills. The expedition had been Frederick's idea but it was Johnny who had asked Mary to join them and, to her delighted astonishment, Mrs. Ames had beamed and encouraged and said what a nice outing it would be for her—almost as if she saw Johnny as a dazzling young woman who was threatening her son and Mary as an effective chaperone. But, rattling about in the back of the Delage, Mary did not wonder why Mrs. Ames had let her come, or worry because Frederick had not really wanted her. She only marvelled at her own luck, out on the spree this lovely evening with two young men.

It was an expensively simple hotel, empty of locals. The bar was full of stuffed fish in glass cases, polished brass, Army officers and Air Force pilots. Frederick peered round him with a shy, almost lost air, for an empty table. His limp, as he led them to a corner, was more pronounced than usual as if he suddenly needed to explain to everyone why he was not in uniform. He fussed over removing the froth-rimmed glasses from the table, complained because they were not serving drinks on the terrace and then said, in such a loud, aggressive voice that more than one winged and ribboned officer turned to stare at them, 'What will you have? Mary? Johnny?'

'It's my party,' Johnny said. 'No, old man. I insist.

'I'll have brandy and ginger ale,' Mary said. This was not

bravado: she had the idea, inherited from her grandmother, that brandy was medicinal.

'A lager would be more suitable,' Frederick said high-handedly. He gave her a frowning glance and to her disgust, she found herself blushing.

She said, 'I don't like beer,' and added, feeling young and callow, 'I was eighteen last week.'

'I should have thought you much older,' Johnny said. His smile deepened. 'This is a celebration, then. How absolutely *marvellous*.'

His amused response was mechanical but enormously warming. She was hurt when he had gone to edge his way to the bar and Frederick said, 'He's almost as sincere as he sounds. About ninety-five per cent is genuine. It's the last five per cent that's just empty good manners and sticks in the gullet.'

Mary was too young to be much concerned with people's relationships with each other, she was only interested in their attitude towards herself. She did not understand yet that there is sometimes more love in criticism than in praise: you want the loved one to be perfect. She saw only that, beside Johnny, Frederick had an unfinished air and thought he was simply envious because Johnny found it so easy to be agreeable and do the right thing.

'You're just jealous,' she said.

He turned to her with a shocked face. 'Oh *no*, Mary.'

A deep blush—Frederick coloured up as easily as a shy girl—crept up his neck and darkened the skin under his thinning hair. He closed his eyes as if to shut out some appalling vision and muttered, 'What a dreadful thing to say.'

She was at a loss. 'I'm sorry,' she murmured.

He leaned forward; plump, freckled hands gripping plump knees, his eyes wide and grave. His long, serious gaze was embarrassing; she attempted a rueful grin. He shook his head, sighing. 'Mary,' he began, and paused. He gave

another long sigh. 'Mary, you must believe me. There is *nothing* like that. Nothing at all.'

It was Mary's turn to be shocked. She saw that for Frederick the word 'jealous' had an immediate, sexual connotation. She knew that men sometimes fell in love with each other but nothing had been further from her mind. She felt a queer mixture of pride and horror in the knowledge that Frederick thought her capable of what seemed an enormously sophisticated accusation. But to blurt out the truth was impossible: he would be appalled to realize the suggestion had been in his mind alone. Matching his seriousness she said in a low voice, 'I believe you,' and avoided his eyes.

She was relieved when Johnny came back with the drinks. He brought several Army officers with him. Mary saw that he would be bound to find friends and acquaintances almost everywhere. She shook hands with a pink young Captain, with a bull-necked Major who looked ten years older than Johnny or Frederick but who had apparently been at school with them.

They were all nice to her in a jolly, casual way and re-filled her glass repeatedly, but she was a little frightened and naturally out of it as much as Frederick, whose voice she could hear from time to time, plaintively mentioning to the Major one school friend after another with the frenetic hopelessness of the unpopular boy at a re-union party. The Captain, sitting beside her, asked, 'Do you know Billy Stringer?'

She shook her head and looked encouraging, which was a mistake, because he at once reeled off a number of other names and looked faintly puzzled when she knew none of them. She thought he was probably drunk, his eyes focused on her so very uncertainly, and was relieved when he returned silently to his drink. For a while she sat with her head inclined to one side as if listening to distant music and smiled copiously whenever she caught anyone's eye. Finally the Captain asked her if her father was in the Army. 'He's too old,' she said,

and then realized that he had meant was it her father's profession? 'My father is a chiropodist,' she said.

'That's a good one,' he crowed, throwing back his head and slapping his hand on the table.

'But it's not a joke, he is,' she said, surprised. He stopped laughing and gave her an odd look, bemused and disbelieving. She saw that if she persisted in telling the truth he would think her affectedly silly—more, half mad. In his world you did not meet chiropodists, or their daughters, socially.

Like the others, he was Regular Army. Their conversation seemed to Mary to consist of a series of uproarious anecdotes about people she had never heard of. Her attention drifted to a blond Flight Sergeant at the bar. He had a lot of fine down on his red cheeks and was singing 'Danny Boy'. He had a lusty voice and gave a splendid performance, caricaturing a sobbing, Irish tenor. When the last notes died away Mary became aware that Frederick had given up stumbling after a rapport with the fat-necked Major and was having a row with him. They had got on to politics: the Government, the Major maintained, was out to ruin not only the Empire, but the Army.

'It's so bloody feudal,' Frederick burst out. 'All this nonsense about officers and men. The Americans wouldn't stand for it.'

There was a roar of laughter as if he had said something surpassingly witty. 'The men prefer it,' the Major said with a drunken air of uttering gospel wisdom. 'They like to feel their officer is a cut above them. It gives them confidence. You can't expect them to respect their officers if they see them getting drunk in the Sergeants' Mess.'

Frederick's eyes were red. 'It's ridiculous,' he said, his voice rising shrilly. 'It's so *undemocratic*.'

Though the others had laughed as much at the Major as with him, Frederick's ineffective righteousness was as indecent as a dirty joke in mixed society. They stared glumly at their drinks.

'Democracy isn't necessarily the best form of government,' said Johnny, speaking directly and soothingly to Frederick. 'It's often the worst sort of people who get to the top. They're the only ones who will bother to push themselves there.'

He smiled round the table with sweet, rather remote good humour.

Frederick said sarcastically, 'You mean people ought to be content in the station to which it has pleased God to call them?'

'No—of course not.' Johnny frowned as if he were trying to work out what he really did feel. 'It's just that it seems somehow degrading to pull yourself up by your bootstraps,' he said.

Mary saw that he really believed this. It wasn't so much snobbery as a deep, fastidious arrogance that was curiously inoffensive because so very old-fashioned: the kind of arrogance you sometimes glimpse in dark portraits of be-whiskered Victorian gentlemen, confident of their place in the world.

2

IT was á miraculous night, still, moonless and scented. Johnny drove fast, the headlamps cutting straight into the dark curve of the night, descending in swoops down the wavy mountain road to the dark town.

Once in bed, Mary fell asleep instantly. She woke to find the bedside lamp burning and a man standing beside it and watching her. After a second of surging panic she saw it was only Frederick in pyjamas and grey woollen dressing-gown. He lay down on the bed and pulled her into his arms.

Astonished, she lay passive while he kissed her with moist,

despairing kisses, passionate in a theoretical kind of way as if he were following instructions in a booklet. She was only half-awake, only half-embarrassed, not seriously alarmed. She did not move hand or foot and Frederick was careful not to touch any part of her body other than her face and shoulders, nor to disarrange the bedclothes. Although he moaned endearments, Mary sensed that he was no more excited than she was. It was their conversation in the pub that had provoked this behaviour, she slowly realized. He was trying to prove to himself that he was not interested in Johnny. She was stupidly proud of this imaginative leap but it only produced a farcical situation. It was impossible, for pity's sake, to protest or push him away.

Then a board squeaked on the landing and a great hollow of fear opened before her.

'It's all right. Someone's gone to the bathroom,' Frederick whispered.

He sat up cautiously, smoothing back a strand of hair. He swallowed. 'Oh God. I'm sorry. It was unforgivable.'

He looked pitifully ashamed but she thought his remorse affected. She could not believe that he was not obsessed, as she was, by the fear that Mrs. Ames would come in and find them together. Terror beat wings in her throat. 'Don't be silly,' she whispered back, straining her ears for further sounds from the landing.

He took her hand and said with abstract tenderness, as if quietening a panicky child, 'Don't worry, Mary. No one will have heard us.'

The board creaked again and this time she knew it was the same board that always bothered her if she got up to go to the bathroom in the night. It was just outside her room. As she gripped Frederick's hand, Mrs. Ames opened the door and stood there in her peach satin nightgown and blue woollen bed jacket, the long, long hair that had once captivated Mr. Ames released from its daytime ear-phones and falling richly on her shoulders.

'I thought as much,' she said.

Frederick stood up. 'I've got a headache,' he said. 'I came to see if Mary had an aspirin.'

Mrs. Ames smiled with a kind of gloating, personal triumph. Embarrassment was unknown to her. She would have smiled in just the same way if she had actually caught them in bed together.

'Do you expect me to believe that?' Her smile became a theatrically incredulous leer.

Mary sat upright, clutching the sheet to her throat. 'It's true,' she lied desperately. 'I hadn't got an aspirin. So we were just talking. I couldn't sleep . . .'

'Liar,' Mrs. Ames said. 'Filthy little liar. Dirty little tart.'

'Mother,' Frederick protested. His mouth was twitching nervously.

'You keep out of this.' Her eyes fixed on Mary, dark and curiously shining. 'I've caught you out properly, Madam, haven't I?'

Mary felt sick and cold. She was frightened of Mrs. Ames in the way she would be frightened of an idiot or a wild animal: she did not understand why she behaved as she did. She only knew, horrified and uncomprehending, that Mrs. Ames was glorying in the situation. This was something better than a dirty bit of gossip about a neighbour or a salacious paragraph in the Sunday paper. For once she had a marvellous outlet for her stores of malice and frustration.

She began in a voice that was low and controlled enough. 'Well, I can't say I'm surprised. I've had my eye on you from the word go. I know your type, bred in the gutter, live in the gutter. Oh—I've watched you, don't think I haven't. Treading mud all over the house as if you'd been born in a pig sty, leaving filthy things about for men to see—pretending you couldn't say Boo to a goose . . . you needn't think you took *me* in with your "yes, Auntie", and "no, Auntie".'

Mary ground her fists into her ears. The room roared about

her, the woman's face seemed to float in mid-air, a swollen, purple bag of anger, her voice rose in a screech. '... ingratitude . . . under my own *roof* . . . I suppose you thought you could catch Frederick that way . . . my innocent boy . . . slut . . . randy little bitch . . .'

She let out a stream of words Mary had never heard before. There was a dribble of spit at the corners of her mouth and she showed the whites of her eyes like a frightened horse.

Memory would later make the scene ludicrous: Frederick cowering against the wall, tears streaming down his face; a distantly glimpsed, pale face—Johnny's—at the door; Mrs. Ames in her flowing, satin nightgown, slowly inflating like some hideous balloon and gabbling obscenities like a frustrated spinster under an anaesthetic. But at the time Mary was half crazed with fear. Mrs. Ames was terrifying, all powerful. There was no defence against her.

'It's not true,' Mary cried hoarsely. 'Frederick's not capable of it.'

It was a cruel thing to say, far crueller than anything Mrs. Ames had said: her ravings were horrible but so fantastic as to be meaningless. In spite of her fear, in the split second before she spoke Mary knew this. She also knew that no one could possibly blame her for saying it. It was licensed cruelty, a thing beyond pardon.

Mrs. Ames cried out and hit her across the face. Mary's head jerked back against the bedstead and blood poured from her nose. Mrs. Ames clawed at the bedclothes and then grunted as someone caught her round the waist. Tipping her head back and holding a handkerchief to her face, Mary saw her lose her balance, screaming and clutching at Johnny's arm. Frederick seized a chair and together they thrust her into it. Mary's eyes fixed on the detail of her bare feet, dragging on the floor. The ankles were puffy with veins the colour of ripe, dark plums. Mrs. Ames began to moan, a long, monotonous, animal sound.

'Stop that,' Johnny said. 'Stop it at once, d'you hear?' He was dressed in blue trousers and shirt. His face wore an expression of calm distaste as he waited for silence with the confidence of the best kind of schoolmaster producing order in a classroom, or the best kind of Empire builder quelling a native riot. Mrs. Ames stopped moaning. She sat, eyes glazed, fists doubled on the arms of the chair, breathing like an exhausted runner.

'Ames,' Johnny said, turning, as it were, to the head prefect or his aide-de-camp. 'What's all this about?'

Frederick muttered something that Mary couldn't catch. He was white as a cuttle-fish, the freckles stood out on his skin like stones.

'Get out,' Mrs. Ames said. 'Get out.' She gripped the arms of the chair and struggled to get up. 'How dare you come in here—interfering, pushing your nose in where it's not wanted. What business is it of yours anyway?' Panting, she managed to stand upright.

Johnny smiled with cold courtesy. 'As much my business as anyone's, wouldn't you say?'

His politeness was a form of contempt that rang out, clear and hard as a bell. Mrs. Ames's gaze flew wildly to her son. Frederick gave a long, trembling sigh and put his hand gently on her arm.

Johnny said, 'Mrs. Ames, I was witness to most of the things you said tonight. To this *child*.' His voice hardened with the merest hint of anger, enough to give Mary a sudden, gleeful sense of vengeful anticipation, not enough to make him lose his dignity. 'And I must tell you, regretfully, that if I hear any more of these malicious, lying accusations from you, or if any are reported to me, I shall suggest that Mary's parents take action on her behalf.'

It was chivalrous and just. It was also slightly ridiculous like turning big guns on a rabbit. Directed against someone of his own sort, this precise, legal threat would have been pompous to the point of absurdity. To Mrs. Ames, it opened

up unplumbed depths of shame and horror. She looked nakedly, utterly bewildered, her black eyes staring, her long jaw beginning to quiver. For a moment, for all the dreadful joy in watching her humiliation, Mary felt a painful wrench of shame and pity. But when Mrs. Ames began to cry, slow, awful crying that made her face old and ugly beyond belief, adult compassion died and she felt only a child's terror and revulsion. It was a kind of physical disgust, as if she had just bitten into an apple and found it crawling with maggots. Gulping like a child ashamed to cry, she got out of bed and ran from the room, ran blindly down the stairs and out into the dark, empty garden.

* * *

When Johnny came after her, she was shivering in the wet grass by the laurel bushes and beginning to be disgusted with herself with the anguished egotism of the very young. She should have stood up for herself, argued—as if it had been possible to argue—not rushed out into the night, barefoot and in her nightgown. But when Johnny crossed the lawn, thoughtfully carrying her slippers and her tweed school coat, the unselfconscious seriousness of his manner reassured her. He slipped the coat round her shoulders and she began to cry, loud, childish sobs that he stifled against his shoulder.

She was not a child, though: leaning against him after the tears had stopped, she felt physical desire, sharp and immediate. For some reason this made her feel ashamed. She drew away from him, blushing in the shadows.

He said gently, 'Put your slippers on. You'll catch cold.'

Obediently, she put them on and then stood, waiting.

He said, 'Well, what are we going to do with you?' His voice was half-humorous but assured her of his kindness and his ability to deal with this—with any—situation.

Mary relaxed, as if in a pair of sheltering arms. He could be responsible for everything. She said, with exaggerated, waif-like appeal, 'I'm sorry I said that about Frederick.'

'Why? You were perfectly right. It's hard to see poor old Fred as a wicked seducer.'

Though she knew she had deliberately misled him, that she had intended him to think her too young to mean anything else, his casual words were like balm; she felt healed and forgiven. Gratefully, she handed him the more immediate problem. 'I don't know what I can say to Mrs. Ames.'

He raised his eyebrows, surprised. 'There's no reason why you should say anything to her. Naturally, you can't stay here. That's obvious.' He hesitated. 'You must go home to your mother.'

Mary had a terrible desire to laugh. 'My mother is dead.'

'Oh.' He bent towards her. 'I'm sorry.'

He stood very close, not touching her. The garden was grey with the promise of dawn and there was a warm, grass-scented breeze. It was the sort of moment when you can talk to a stranger. Mary said, 'She died when I was nine. She killed herself. She had a growth in her breast. It was benign but she was sure it was cancer because doctors never tell you the truth.'

'You poor child,' he said with a kind of stiff gentleness that told her she had overshot the mark of intimacy. He wasn't snubbing her, nor was he shy, he simply had a strict regard for other people's privacy: this was a confidence that she might prefer, later, not to have made. Although she guessed this, she was appalled, as if she had been making emotional capital out of her mother's death.

She said quickly, 'My father brought me up. My mother died ages ago, before the war.'

He smiled as if that wasn't so long ago to him.

'I'm sure your father would be horrified if you stayed here after tonight.'

'I suppose so,' she said doubtfully, realizing that she could not bear the thought of telling her father what had happened: he would be so shocked, even, perhaps, disbelieving. He was

so sure of the decency and kindness of ordinary people that Mrs. Ames's behaviour would seem to him monstrous, almost mythical, like some dark wickedness out of an old Gothic tale. Mary thought that she could not imagine her father ever being in an ordinary, human dilemma or anyone daring to humiliate him; it was as if he created a moral climate about him in which everyone always behaved with a simple, forthright goodness like characters out of *Little Women*. Besides, he had been very impressed by Mrs. Ames and the pompous, Victorian comfort of her house. On the one occasion he had visited Mary, neat as a pin in his best navy suit, he had said when she saw him off at the station, 'Try not to be a trouble to Mrs. Ames. It's good of her to take you in.'

'I'm going home soon anyway,' she said. 'Term ends in a fortnight. And I'm leaving school.' Secure in his presence, Mrs. Ames's outburst suddenly presented itself as no more than an exaggerated form of her normal behaviour. She giggled rather hysterically. 'I shall be all right. I'm used to her. It wasn't really so shocking.'

His serious expression rebuked her. 'You can't possibly stay. She's a terrible woman.' He paused and added gravely, 'And it *was* shocking. I have never been so shocked in my life.'

'But I can't just leave . . .'

'Give me one good reason why not.'

Mary hesitated. Clearly, to his mind, no nice young girl could bear to stay in a house where she had been so outrageously insulted. Besides this simple belief, her very real objections—that it would be impossible to explain to her father and to the school why she had to leave in such a hurry—would sound frivolous. She saw that Johnny was the sort of person whose attitudes are so right, so decent, that other people would sometimes have to falsify their own in order to live up to him. She shivered suddenly and he put his hand on her shoulder.

'Try not to think about it,' he said. 'It's all over now.' He lifted his chin and looked very lively and competent. 'Go and pack your things. You live in London, don't you? I'll drive you home now, right away.'

She protested, embarrassed, 'I can't let you do that. It's too far . . .' He looked at her quizzically and she went on with a queer little flare of resentment, 'You're enjoying this, aren't you? I mean—honestly—there's no need to go to such preposterous lengths. After all, you could just put me on a train and wash your hands of me. You're being too *gallant*.'

He said simply, 'Isn't that better than not bothering to make an effort if it doesn't happen to suit you?' He smiled. 'I haven't any ulterior motive, I promise. I shan't try to seduce you.'

This easy disclaimer excited and depressed her at the same time. Here was a young man who had flown up high and seen the world spread out beneath him like a map. It was ridiculous of her to suppose she could have anything to offer him. 'I didn't mean that,' she said and felt she had spoken too quickly to be convincing. She laughed, shyly. 'It's just that I don't understand why you're being so awfully kind.'

He laughed out loud. 'My dear child, I'm quite sure that I feel the normal amount of pleasure and sinful pride in my masterful handling of the situation.'

This may have been true, though it didn't, in human terms, lessen the value of his gentleness and goodwill. But, as she had guessed already, his motives were simplified by a strong sense of the kind of behaviour expected of a gentleman. He rescued her—even at the time she understood this perfectly well—as naturally as he would have rescued a tree'd kitten; it was precisely that kind of action, the automatic, quite impersonal chivalry he would always show to something weaker than himself. On the other hand, he *was* concerned for her; his kindness wasn't hypocritical. Like his other excellent qualities it was a perfectly good, hall-marked article from the same shop as his good manners and his accent and

his officer's sword—not an expensive shop, necessarily, but a hushed, respectful one like Gieves, where everything is of good quality and built to last and no one gives you a bill.

* * *

When they married, something over a year later, the war was over and Mary was just nineteen, still young enough, even if she hadn't been young for her age, her mind still the sharp, narrow mind of a clever schoolgirl, to be a little awed by the fact that he wanted her. Not over-awed—when peace came and Johnny signed on for another five years, she saw this was in a way a safety measure, a shelving of the problems of peace—but sufficiently so, to keep her image of him unchanged for years. It struck her, long afterwards, that your knowledge of people, even of the people you love, is confined to certain set pictures, snapshots, taken at different times and in different poses. At some point you thumb over the album and see that the pose, though a pretty one, is suddenly out of date. But when did it happen? How do you pick out the moment of change over the years?

3

SEVEN years of peace is a long time, long enough to change a lot of people but Charles Franks was neither curious nor nostalgic. He had gone to the re-union party because he was, briefly, lonely in London. He had just come back after three years in America; people had moved, Charles had not kept in touch, taking his friends where he found them.

He knew it was a mistake as soon as he entered the crowded room. He thought, isn't it always? Who do you ever meet at this sort of function except the man you most

disliked, the veteran bore, the man with the hard luck story? There were too many men for whom war had been a time when they counted, for whom peace was just a long, boring appendix to their biography.

As if to bear him out, it was Climper who accosted him almost at once. He said, they'd been at Scempton together, hadn't they? Charles remembered him with difficulty: a big, facetious man with a flourishing ginger moustache and a thin, reedy laugh, a good pilot, a stout drinker, by his own account a wow with the women. Since then he had been out to Rhodesia, sunk his gratuity in a car business and come home again. 'No future there,' he said. 'They're going to get too soft with the munts. You've got to draw the line somewhere. Christ, man, you've got your future to think of.'

'Of course,' Charles said, thinking, what future? This Climper, seven years older, pale eyes swimming in gin, ginger hair spread sparsely over his glistening scalp, had just got a new car on the firm and was buying a nice little bungalow at Southend-on-Sea but his suit was shabby, his cuffs frayed. As he talked, his eyes darted: he had his future to think of and someone more important might come in. For Charles, that shifting, unconfident glance spelt failure more clearly than the shabby suit. He thought guiltily: poor old Climper, and wondered how soon he could get away.

The chance came sooner than he had hoped for. Someone laughed across the room and he saw Johnny Prothero, standing with a group of men by the long buffet table.

Climper said, 'Gentleman Jim's turned up, I see. We should be honoured.' He curled his lip sourly, caught Charles's eye and added in mock apology, 'Sorry. I forgot you moved in such exalted circles.'

Charles said, 'Didn't you know? I was Court Jester.'

Climper grinned with malicious delight and Charles felt a quick surge of anger. He had dropped straight into the trap, sunk to Climper's level. Coldly ashamed, he excused himself almost at once, cutting the man off, he realized immediately

afterwards, in the middle of a sentence. He knew Climper would have done the same if he had sighted a more promising audience; all the same, the small discourtesy nagged him as he threaded his way through the press.

Then he forgot Climper. 'Charles, how *marvellous*,' Johnny said, pumping his hand, and the drawling, Southern English voice with the emphatic adjective kicked Charles's mind back seven years, so that for a moment he was surprised to see Johnny not in his flying jacket, his oxygen mask dangling from its strap. Certainly, he looked no older. His face was barely more lined than it had been then, except for a few more sun crinkles round those astonishing eyes—still an oddly innocent face, Charles thought with a pang, the kind of face that makes you feel old and a bit debauched and tired of the things you've done that you're ashamed of.

'It really is wonderful to see you,' Johnny said, still holding his hand and smiling as if there was no one in the whole wide world he had so much wanted to see. It was a way he had, Charles remembered, a beautifully effective form of flattery that nevertheless produced a slight constraint: the welcome was so warmly, so unaffectedly effusive that you despaired of matching it.

He said awkwardly, 'Johnny, you old idiot,' and suddenly, in spite of his very real pleasure, he felt an odd, instinctive withdrawal that was more than the ordinary nervousness of meeting an old friend after a period of years. Johnny was more than an old friend, he had once been a kind of idol.

* * *

His feeling for Johnny had been part of a larger affection, for England. Charles's mother had been an Englishwoman, his father a Czech, a dentist in Prague. They were both Jewish though apart from an occasional observance to please some elderly relation, they did not practise their religion, nor did they have many Jewish friends. They had hardly, until the middle thirties, thought of themselves as Jews. But it

was not a club you could elect to join or decide to resign from; at that time, to be a Jew in Europe was to be a martyr without a choice. Charles and his mother came to England in the early summer of nineteen thirty-eight. His father was to follow them when he had settled their affairs; sold his practice, dealt with the small, family business, made arrangements for an old, sick aunt to be sent into the country to friends. It all took longer than he expected and longer than it need have done. He lingered like so many others out of an unreasonable, unreasoning hope and perhaps, also, out of fear: he was no longer a young man, it was his whole life, not just his practice or his dental factory that he was leaving behind. And like so many others, he left it too late. The weeks went by and the months. The boy Charles, safe in his mother's own county of Kent, was afraid for his father, for his old Aunt Sophie, for his little cousin, Lise—and placed, as a result, an unyouthfully high value on safety. He was a wary, analytical, in some ways almost a hard, young man but he lavished on the country that sheltered him a wholehearted and uncritical love. It was the payment of a debt of gratitude that embraced the climate, the plain, gentle people, the warm beer, even the stubborn habit of shunning the metric system and driving on the left of the road. Above all, at Scempton when they had flown together—Charles had been rear gunner—it had charged his feelings for Johnny with a romantic extravagance: he was the kind of Englishman Charles had read about in Buchan, gentle, courteous, a master of the throw-away line, the understated bravery. (One trip, two shells had hit them, one through the turret, one behind the port wing. All Charles knew was the searing yellow flash that seemed to split his eyes open. When he came round, the moon was at his feet like a ball and someone was saying, 'I've been hit, I've been hit.' Charles came down and found the fuselage on the port side gone, the floor up to the tank a mass of flames and smoke. There was a man doubled up like a rag doll; Charles turned him over and saw his eyes, scarlet pools in

the dark, crusted mess of his face. He shouted that the petrol tank was on fire, astonished to hear his own voice. There was a long, empty moment of terror in which he knew he could do nothing, his limbs would not answer him. Then Johnny said, 'Put it out, then,' as if he were asking someone to pass the butter. That was all, but it was the sort of thing Charles remembered. The sort of thing that had happened more than once, when his courage would have fallen apart if Johnny had not been there.)

Now the memory seemed trite, cheapened by too many war stories, by seven years of living on a lower level of intensity, so that now even reality looked counterfeit. Remembering how passionately he had admired Johnny, Charles felt raw shame pitch in his stomach as at the memory of some appalling adolescent naïveté. For a moment it distorted not only past but present assessment: he felt a twinge of resentment as Johnny smiled into his face and asked him what he was doing now, handing him, Charles thought, his open smile and his flattering interest like an expensive present.

But there was no basic insincerity there. 'How simply splendid,' Johnny said when Charles explained about the Fulbright grant that had taken him to America and the law fellowship he was hoping for. The 'splendid' was not gushing but carried a sort of disinterested passion that impressed Charles who despised envy, but guessed that to be quite without it, to be genuinely, deep down, absolutely delighted by another man's success, was a luxury few people could afford. He realized that he did not know how Johnny was able to be like that, that he knew, indeed, almost nothing about him or the world he lived in that had made him the way he was. He asked, suddenly curious, 'What are you doing now?'

'Changing horses in midstream. You know, I signed on for another five years. I only came out about eighteen months ago.' He hesitated and added, 'I meant to go on flying—the airlines are crying out for pilots—but I failed my medical

for a civil licence. Apparently my eyesight's not as good as it was.'

He smiled, but it must have shocked him, Charles thought. If you had spent ten years of your life flying and thinking about flying, it would be a difficult thing to forget. 'How do you feel about it?' he asked.

'A bit early to tell. Rather like having a limb cut off, I suspect. One flounders a bit at first. I've just joined my uncle's firm. It used to be the family firm but we sold out—Lester's still on the board.'

'Will you enjoy it, do you think?'

He frowned slightly. 'Hard to say. At the moment I don't *exactly feel*—fully stretched, if you know what I mean? As if *the old engine* was only just ticking over?' He laughed cheerfully at himself. 'Oh—it'll turn out all right.'

Charles lifted his glass. 'Good luck, anyway,' he said, meaning it, but thinking that luck was something Johnny *hardly* needed. It was something he had as naturally as *breath*, so naturally that you couldn't resent it, any more than you could grudge a happy child a birthday present.

They talked for a *little longer*, drifted into that sudden, alcoholic freedom in which *everything becomes marvellously* easier. Then the slight tension Charles had felt snapped altogether and Johnny was simply Johnny, the dressed-up memory and the living man suddenly become one—a perfectly *nicé*, personable man with an easy laugh who wasn't concerned with anything except an unaffected pleasure at seeing his old friends again. They were not alone for long. The party became fluid and they welcomed with boisterous gaiety men they hardly remembered. Someone thumped a piano, a small man with an air of seedy roguery sang a song that went to the tune of 'There is a Green Hill Far Away' Charles's mood developed into a rosy, sentimental glow. He exchanged addresses with a tall, lean, sad man with a wilting moustache, with a grinning Scot with two teeth missing, with Johnny. . . .

'You must come and see us,' he said. He didn't look drunk—he didn't get drunk, Charles remembered—only ruddily flushed as if after a week in the open. Charles nodded, smiled, tucked the card in his wallet, sure that by tomorrow it would mean as little as the promises to the Scot, to the sad moustache. Their worlds didn't touch; sober, they would have nothing to say to each other. Affection could survive with a limited vocabulary but only for one evening, once in a while.

Outside the hotel, he found Climper, hovering alone on the pavement, rather drunk, too late to catch the last train home to his bungalow by the sea. Charles took him out to dinner, endured two long, sweating, mournful hours and then packed him off to spend the night (he said) with an aunt in Fulham. It was a maudlin, rather pointless gesture that was partly an apology, partly a nervous gesture to the gods, like carrying an umbrella on a sunny day.



He woke at dawn with a dry mouth and remembered that he owed Johnny ten pounds. He got out of bed, rinsed out his mouth and lay down again, feeling slightly confused as if he had committed some minor social gaffe. Not in forgetting the loan—a hurried necessity on the morning the hospital telephoned to say his mother was dying: when he came back Johnny had been posted and his own de-mob papers were in—but in remembering it now. Charles had that curious shyness about money that dogs so many people who have been poor: it embarrassed him to imagine the smooth astonishment on Johnny's face when he was reminded of this small debt. Ten pounds had meant nothing to him, he had lent it as he always lent money, with a kind of apologetic carelessness as if to be rich was a matter for reproach. Looking back in the dawn depression, it seemed to Charles that his generosity had carried not apology but condescension, like a sting in the tail.

Then the treacherous thought that he could quite easily forget the whole thing, appalled him. It would be impossible

to rest now until he had dealt with it. He bathed and dressed, found Johnny's card in his wallet and went straight to the telephone.

He invited Johnny to lunch. Johnny sounded surprised, pleased, but lunch was impossible. 'We're going down to Fitchet—my grandfather's house in Kent. Making it a long week-end.'

Charles said, 'I have to go to Cambridge on Monday.' There was a pause: the end of the next week seemed impossibly far away. He said, 'The fact is, I owe you some money.'

'What?'

'Ten pounds.'

'Good God.'

Charles explained hurriedly. Some distant inflection in Johnny's voice made him feel that the whole thing was somehow in rather poor taste.

Johnny said, 'What a very extraordinary thing. How terribly nice of you to remember.'

He seemed to bubble over with well-bred, incredulous amusement. Charles had a moment of irrational anger.

He said, 'It's a racial characterisitic to be conscientious about money.'

There was a pause. Charles knew just how Johnny must look: the blank, marble surprise, the veiled withdrawal in the eyes.

Johnny laughed, not quite easily. 'My dear chap . . .' There was another, slightly longer pause and then he went on with a noticeable increase in warmth and garrulousness as if he felt he needed to apologize for something. He was *so* sorry about lunch, he had been enormously pleased to see Charles again, it was shocking how one lost touch with one's friends. They really must fix something. It sounded to Charles, smarting from his own stupidity, like an excessively well-mannered brush-off. When Johnny asked him to hold on a minute, Charles amused himself by ironically listing the

elaborate excuses he was sure would follow: they were absolutely booked up for the next five weeks, then they had to run over to Cannes or up to Scotland for a spot of salmon fishing or to Norfolk for a week's shooting. Charles had no very real idea how people of that sort spent their time, nor did he much care. He was too absorbed in his own world—growing a little solemn with the long nights of study, a little complacent with a kind of success that yielded not to money but to intelligence and effort—to be very curious about what went on outside it. He *was* curious about Johnny, if he had not been, memory would hardly have dredged up that trivial debt, but it was almost an academic interest, totally without envy. In all his life Charles had never envied anything except security. Now that he had it, he wanted nothing else, nothing beyond the safe perspective of scholarship, university appointments and articles in the *Modern Law Review*; a warm, bookish world from which life could be safely looked at from one window, for ever.

It always unnerved him slightly to be offered a different view. He decided that he was not altogether sorry Johnny could not lunch. What would they have found to talk about? Johnny was the sort of man who would naturally find it difficult to talk to someone not exactly of his own kind. Now they were no longer flying together, he might not feel quite comfortable with an intellectual Jew.

Johnny said in his ear, 'Look, old man, I know it's awfully short notice but we seem to be booked solid for the next few weeks—could you possibly come down to Fitchet this week-end? My wife's longing to meet you.'

Charles imagined Johnny's wife; a rangy ex-deb with a plangent voice. He said, 'That's very kind of you.' Surprise had emptied his mind. For a moment he wasn't sure if he wanted to go or what excuse he could offer if he didn't. He stumbled into what he felt was the correct idiom. 'Won't your people mind? I mean—it's awfully short notice for them, isn't it?'

'Lord, no. Really. There's masses of room. Grandfather never minds how many people come. He's always liked a full house though he doesn't get much fun out of it now, poor old chap. He's bedridden—he had a stroke last year.'

'I'm sorry,' Charles said. 'I liked your grandfather.'

He spoke sincerely. His memory was distant but clear: a beaky nose, sharp, dark eyes, a sharp, if confined intelligence. A terrifying old devil, Charles had thought, but basically kind and more—willing to stretch himself, to try to understand ways of thought that were not his own.

'I didn't realize you'd met him. But I'm glad you liked him.'

Johnny's voice softened perceptibly in the way it always had, Charles remembered, when he spoke of his grandfather. 'He's a marvellous old man. I'm sure he'd love to see you again. Not many people come nowadays, y'know. Clara—my sister—goes down most week-ends and my uncle and aunt are there, of course, but that's not awfully exciting for him. Nor for me.' He laughed. 'Altogether—it would be most awfully nice if you could come.'

His enthusiasm touched Charles and then disturbed him a little. It seemed to him that the eagerness in Johnny's voice suddenly rang with a peculiar note of desperation. 'Do come. It's a marvellous house. I'd love you to see it. I've always loved it,' he said.

There was nothing odd in the words, the oddness lay in the way he said them, with a kind of urgent wistfulness, as if his old self-sufficiency was not enough, any more.

'I remember it,' Charles said, slightly piqued because Johnny had forgotten. 'You took me there once. For a forty-eight.'

* * *

It was a square, red-brick house, approached by a straight gravel drive edged with yew cut in the shape of peacocks. There was a stone-flagged hall; over the door there were two

furled, cavalry pennants holed with moth; up the wide, polished staircase several dark, full-length portraits of men in uniform with swords, and one good Romney, a pale, dark-eyed child in a white pinafore with a blue sash.

Johnny had lived there with General Sir George Prothero, his grandfather on his mother's side. His parents had been in India. His father was a colonel in the Indian Army but there was no portrait of him on the staircase because although he was 'also a Prothero', as Johnny had explained when Charles asked him about it, he belonged to a junior branch of the family. The only picture Charles had ever seen of Colonel Prothero was a framed photograph Johnny had with him at the base, of his father in regimentals and his mother in white, leaving the village church under an arch of crossed swords. Johnny carried the photograph with him more out of convention than sentiment: he had once told Charles that he had only really known his parents from letters. He said this without self-pity: in a world of Empire builders and serving soldiers it must have seemed an entirely normal arrangement. When Charles had asked him if he hadn't missed his parents, he looked honestly surprised. 'I was too happy at Fitchet,' he said. 'It was a wonderful place to live.'

Charles had understood this. It was a pleasant, hospitable house: in the library where stuffed pikes and crossed Zulu spears hung on the walls between the bookshelves, children's feet had scuffed the Persian carpet and children's fingers had picked holes in the rose damask chair covers. Everything was used and shabby, nothing was new except the Bentley in the converted barn, but the whole house rang of something subtler than wealth, of generations of unworried comfort as solid and convincing as the gleam on old furniture. It was an unforced, elegiac note, that the inner ear caught everywhere, in the portraits, the eighteenth-century miniatures, the delicate, Coleport coffee cups raised to the lips after dinner, the carpeted, tiny bathrooms that had once been linen rooms.

It was a note Charles had heard that leave without emotion. He looked at Fitchet with the undifferentiating appreciation of a traveller in a strange country; admiring but unmoved.

4

CHARLES went down by train that Saturday afternoon and walked from the station. The white road climbed the hill, sank down through a dark arch of trees and brought him out into sunlight. Fitchet lay in a hollow; quite small, dignified, intensely private. He crunched up the gravel drive between the peacocks and the hot lawns, and a woman in a yellow silk dress came out of the door to meet him.

He would have known her anywhere, he thought: Johnny's sister, Clara. They were so astonishingly alike, tall, long-necked, golden-eyed. Then, when she furrowed her forehead and said, 'I'm so sorry Johnny's not here,' he saw that she looked much older than her brother. Her face was thin with the thinness of middle age, not youth, the skin was tight over the bone and there were cobweb lines round her nose and mouth. It was a face that would look much the same in twenty years' time, with its melancholy, aristocratic angularity, beautiful rather than pretty, but too nervous to be really beautiful. She reminded Charles of a doe at a park fence: she had just that look of startled gentleness and pride.

She said, 'They took Martin down to the sea. Johnny must have forgotten the time. I know he meant to meet you.' She had a soft, rather fey voice that trailed away at the end of her sentences.

'It's my fault. I caught an earlier train. But I enjoyed the walk from the station.'

'Oh good. But it's so hot. Your bag . . .' She called, 'Julian,'

and a man rose up from behind one of the dark green peacocks. He must have been sunbathing; Charles had not noticed him. He wore shorts and green-stained tennis shoes; a large pair of sunglasses dominated his face and gave him a dangerous look. His body was golden-brown and smooth as a boy's without a trace of hair on his chest or legs and the hair on his head had the bleached, straw fairness of a child's in summer.

Clara introduced them, flushing up to the eyes as if the small social necessity unnerved her. The man's name was Julian Cloutsham. He had a full, heavily inflected voice—he said, '*How* do you do?'—and exuded a kind of breezy heartiness like a male cosmetic. They talked for a minute or two about the startlingly lovely weather and then he said, 'You don't mean you lugged your bag from the station in this heat?' and smiled his supercilious smile at Clara. 'Old George would have brought it. He's still there, I see, minus a bit more hair.'

'Yes—isn't it extraordinary?' Clara turned to Charles. 'He's always been known as Old George, though he isn't so terribly old and I'm not at all sure that his name *is* George. He's always had so little hair that when we were children we used to try and count the strands each time we came home for the holidays. I can remember peering through the glass partition, giggling and trying to count, and praying he wouldn't turn round.'

She laughed, a nice little girl's laugh, sudden and easy. It stripped the years away and made the lines on her face seem ridiculous, a cruel joke.

'Poor old George,' Cloutsham said.

'They had both spoken, Charles thought, in the indulgently affectionate tone people use for pet animals—as if the balding, elderly gentleman he had seen snoozing in the station taxi belonged to a different sub-species. He didn't mind this in Clara but he disliked it in Cloutsham, Charles decided, peering into the dark, reflecting pools that hid his eyes.

Charles didn't mind what people were but he liked them to *be* what they were: Cloutsham had the same kind of voice as *Johnny, the same mannerisms, but it was somehow too deliberate, too carefully calculated as if sometime or other he had had the choice of several different disguises and had decided that this was likely to be the most useful one.* He yawned, stretched his smooth, gold body and said to Clara, 'I think I'll go and change, sweetie.' He took off his glasses; without them, his face looked curiously empty. For a second before he turned on his heel and stalked into the house, he glanced at Charles out of pale, sun-strained eyes with an almost contemptuous lack of curiosity.

Clara smiled. 'I expect you'd like to see your room.'

They followed Cloutsham into the cool, musty hall, up the wide staircase, past the portraits and the assegaïs and a rather brutal stone bust in a recess at the turn of the stairs. As they reached the landing, a nurse in a crackling uniform came along the corridor carrying a tray covered with a white napkin. She had a long, sallow face and a closed, righteous expression as if she felt herself superior to the rest of the human race. Charles drew aside to let her pass and she twitched her lips in acknowledgement.

Cloutsham had waited for them. He said in a casual undertone to Clara, 'How is the old boy?'

'Not too well, poor darling.' She glanced rather uneasily at Charles as if she did not want to discuss this in front of him.

Cloutsham pulled down his mouth. 'I hope he makes it,' he said inexplicably, nodded briefly at Charles and disappeared through a heavy, dark door.

Clara showed Charles into a big, light room, full of windows. There was a high, carved bed with a lace cover, bookcases, broad, leather-topped desk with a Georgian silver inkstand. The general effect was not cluttered but pleasantly haphazard. She said, 'The bath and loo are through that door there. It's tiny, but you have it to yourself.' She

paused, her speech was full of pauses in which her lips moved, struggled, as if to draw words out of the air. She said, 'This used to be Johnny's room.'

There were silver cups, photographs. One, of a boy in a cricket cap, stood on the table by the bed. 'That's Julian,' Clara said. 'They were terrific friends, always.'

Charles looked at the young, bland face and thought that he would have disliked Cloutsham even then—there *was* something to dislike, not much but enough: a faint coldness in the eyes, a slightly peevish moulding to the mouth. 'What does he do?' he asked.

She said vaguely. 'I'm not sure. It always seems to be something different. Lately he's been abroad. I suppose he'd call himself a company director.'

'It's a convenient term.'

'Yes.' She gave him an uncertain smile and beckoned him to the window. 'I've always loved this view,' she said.

Below the window was a garden with peach trees against old walls and beyond, a small wood and a red-roofed farm. It was a lyrical but domestic beauty, a 'lovely view' and Charles admired it with the polite indifference of the habitual town dweller. The country had never attracted him; when he was homesick, in America, it had been for *his* England, for wet, urban streets at twilight, for lines of washing snapping in small gardens, not for green lawns or the consoling privacy of acres.

He said, 'It's different from London.'

'Where do you live?'

'South-west.' He thought there was no point in being more specific. To her, as to Johnny, the suburbs would be places you drove through on your way to somewhere else. She would know people lived in the rabbit-hutch houses and shopped at the neon-lit Parades, but only in the way she knew China was inhabited. In fact China would be more real to her: she might know someone who had been there.

'I've got a flat in Battersea,' she said, surprising him. 'It's

poky, but it looks over the park and it's convenient for the school.'

'Do you teach?' He glanced at her with faint curiosity. She didn't attract him, she was too thin, too tautly strung, too tall—at least an inch taller than he was. She stood beside him, drooping slightly forward, hugging her elbows as if to minimize her eccentric height. Charles noticed her hands, rough on the yellow silk. They were big, bony hands, hard and strong with square, bitten nails.

She shook her head. 'I do a bit of typing—it's a school for deaf children. It's terribly little, really.' She spoke shamefacedly as if acknowledging some debt that he might have expected her to pay more fully.

Charles murmured something about it being useful work.

'I suppose so,' she said. 'But the awful thing is that quite often I find myself loathing it. The children are so pathetic—their lives are so terribly drab, so grey. Sometimes I can't bear it.'

Charles said dryly, 'You can always come home to Fitchet at week-ends.'

She looked surprised, faintly hurt at his tone and he changed the subject quickly, feeling he had been unkind. 'I'm sorry your grandfather is so ill. What did Mr. Cloutsham mean—about hoping he'd make it?'

She glanced at him with startled eyes, trapped, suddenly, in one of her restless silences. The fair skin of her forehead puckered like silk and her mouth worked, trembled, as if on a wisp of air. Charles pitied her terrible nervousness but somehow it reproached him. He felt as if he had unintentionally blundered onto private ground.

She said in a low, nervous voice, 'Grandfather made the estate over to Lester to avoid death duties. You have to do it five years before you die. He's got another two months to go.' She looked squarely at Charles. He guessed that however much it embarrassed her, she would never shirk an issue. 'It sounds dreadfully sordid, doesn't it?' She gave an uncon-

vincing little laugh. 'But it *is* important. To Johnny particularly. It's only the estate that's entailed, you see—the house and a few farms. Grandfather means to provide for Johnny but if he shouldn't—shouldn't make it, as Julian put it, the money would have to go in death duties. I don't pretend to know exactly how it works. I only know that if it happened, Johnny would be quite poor.'

'Poverty is relative, surely?' Though he was curiously shocked, Charles found he could not take this revelation very seriously. If rich people said they were poor, it usually meant they couldn't afford this year's Bentley.

'Well . . . yes. But if you've always expected . . . You see, Johnny won't get a *penny*.' The dull colour burned up suddenly under her skin and she said passionately, 'Oh—it *is* sordid—horrible—to think of the poor old man. He minds far more than anyone else, far, far more than Johnny. *He* only sees his grandfather in pain. But Grandfather won't have drugs in case they shorten his life. Last night, the nurse gave him an injection to make him sleep and he cried like a baby. . . .' Her voice faltered, there were tears in her eyes.

Charles said grimly, 'It's only poor people who can afford to be unrealistic about money.'

For a moment he was irritated with her: she was one of those boring, over-cultivated women who greet every painful discovery—the inescapable facts of life and death that the majority of people have to live with all the time—with privileged little cries of shocked sensibility. Then she turned to him and suddenly smiled, a full, generous smile—Johnny's smile—and said, 'I'm so sorry. This is terribly boring for you. Charles—I may call you Charles?—I'm so pleased, so absolutely delighted that you could come.'

If there was an element of patronage in this burst of speech, of the gracious hostess changing the subject to put an uncouth guest at ease, it could only be detected, Charles felt, by someone unreasonably wary and small-minded. What came

across to him, evaporating his irritation like dew, was an almost magically unqualified warmth, an innocent invitation as if to some children's party.

* * *

Johnny came back, full of apologies, in time for a game of tennis before dinner. There was a lawn court, rather unkempt, at the back of the house. They played doubles, Johnny with Julian Cloutsham, Charles with Johnny's wife, Mary. Charles had not played since before he went to America; the heat and the sudden exercise tired him quickly, and after the first set he sat with his partner watching the two other men play singles.

It was a hard but good-humoured and apparently effortless game; there was a springy jauntiness about all their movements as if they both exercised regularly in clean, bright air. They must have played together a lot: neither of them was ever taken aback by an unusual stroke and from time to time they shouted brief, elliptical phrases at each other, a kind of shorthand speech evolved through years of easy intimacy. Charles thought they made a handsome couple and felt a stupid twist of jealousy—the simple, almost childish jealousy that springs from the discovery that your old friend has other friends he has known longer and better than you.

He looked at the girl next to him, Johnny's wife, who had been 'longing to meet him'. She was a slender, small-breasted girl who sat very still, brown hands still in the white lap of her dress, watching her son Martin beat the nettles at the side of the court for balls. There was an air of solemn, young composure about her that reminded Charles of his girl students; she had not said very much but when she had spoken it was softly and flatly and somehow determinedly as if she had long ago made up her mind on most things and was not likely to change it.

Charles said, his eyes on the boy, 'He's like Johnny, isn't he?'

She pushed back a wisp of dark hair and said, 'Do you

think so?' with an air of faint perturbation as if this did not altogether please her.

'It wasn't a considered statement,' he said. 'I thought it was the right thing to say.'

She laughed. It turned her into a very pretty girl. 'I never understood why people should think that.'

Charles began to say something ponderously funny—he had a rather elephantine sense of humour that he recognized and tended to exaggerate—and then saw that the game had stopped. The two men were standing at the far end of the court talking to Clara. After a moment, Johnny left with her and they began to walk rapidly back to the house. Just before they turned the corner, Johnny began to run.

Cloutsham released the net and strolled towards them.

Mary said, 'What did Clara want?' The laughter had gone from her face, she looked pale and rather tense.

'Granpa wants to see Johnny.' He regarded her with a consciously grave expression like a man who always hires the right look for solemn occasions. 'Apparently he's not so good. He had a bit of a tantrum when Lester went to see him—ordered him out of the room.'

Mary said in a soft, shocked voice, 'Oh—*no*.' Cloutsham put his arm round her shoulders and patted her affectionately. 'Don't worry about it dear,' he said. He looked at Charles. His voice was friendlier than it had been earlier, his interest marked.

'I say—I didn't know your name was Fraenkel.'

'It isn't. It was my mother's name. We took it when we came to England because my father's surname was unpronounceable. When my mother died, I shortened it.' Charles explained stiffly and a little defiantly: this was something he was queerly ashamed of.

'Any relation of Joseph Fraenkel? The shipowner?' The question was casual but he looked at Charles with sharp curiosity.

'He's my uncle.'

Cloutsham grinned amiably at the reluctance in Charles's voice. 'That's not something I'd want to hide, if I were you.' His arm was still round Mary's shoulders. He said, 'I suppose we'd better get back.'

They strolled slowly towards the house. Martin hopped ahead, first on one bird-thin leg, then on the other. As he hopped he sang, a light, tuneless, private song.

Cloutsham said to Mary, 'Have you seen old Frederick lately?'

She answered vaguely, as if her thoughts were a long way away. 'He comes round most weeks, when he has the time. He works most evenings at his boys' club in Stepney.'

'He's a parson, isn't he?'

'No. A probation officer. He didn't go into the Church.'

'Oh, of course. I'd forgotten. We did have lunch once, a couple of years ago. Not a bad chap, old Fred, but a bit worthy. Everyone enjoys being virtuous, but there's a limit.' He laughed as if picturing a grim, deedy world, full of humourless self-deceivers, pleasant enough to belong to but denied to him by his ironic, unwinged honesty. 'Fred takes himself far too seriously.'

'Isn't that a good thing?'

Cloutsham laughed again. 'Yes—if you say so. I wasn't criticizing, just catching up on my friends. I've been away some time, y'know. How does Johnny like working for Lester?'

She twisted away from his arm and said coldly, 'All right, I think.'

Cloutsham looked at her thoughtfully. 'Don't palm me off. Honestly, sweetie, I really want to know. How long do you think he'll go on, working for that amiable old Mogul. Lester likes his pound of flesh and Johnny's not exactly prepared to toe the line, is he?'

She said impatiently, 'They get on all right. Lester's not a kind of ogre. He's quite—benevolent.'

'Oh, *certainly*. If I was a really worthy charity or a Mission

to the Heathen, there's no one I'd rather have on the board. But his relationship with Johnny isn't quite so straightforward. is it? Rightful heir and the old man's darling?' He chuckled, 'Do they get on all right? I thought one of the reasons I was asked down this week-end was to keep the peace—so they could talk to me and not to each other.' He glanced sideways at Charles and suddenly grinned like a mischievous boy who knows he has said something improper. 'Seriously, though—what happens when Granpa dies? Lester's got a son of his own, hasn't he? All good things come to an end, y'know.'

She answered with a spurt of anger, sharp as a match flare.

'Johnny got this job on his own merits. You talk as if he were some sort of remittance man.' She blazed at him with angry grey eyes, her small breasts rose and fell with a quick, excited nervousness beneath the stuff of her white dress.

'For Heaven's sake,' Cloutsham said. He took off his sunglasses and widened his eyes helplessly at Charles.

Charles smiled. He imagined they must have quarrelled earlier. Their relationship must be close enough for that or Cloutsham would not have baited her in quite the way he had—his teasing had that distantly barbed, cruel quality some men show to women they are sexually attracted by but know they have no chance with. It was something she would hardly understand; she seemed quite absurdly young. When Cloutsham walked on, still laughing, to catch up the little boy and hump him, piggy-back, into the house, she glared after him, her lower lip caught fractionally between her teeth like a mutinous little girl.

Charles said soothingly, 'He was only playing the fool. It's about the last thing anyone could say about Johnny, after all.'

'Is it? Johnny has no money of his own, you know. Grandfather has always made him an allowance. And if . . .'

'I know,' he said quickly. 'Clara told me. It's very distressing for you all.' She looked so unhappy that he wanted

to comfort her. 'But Johnny will be all right, you don't really have to worry, do you? Even if the worst happens—his uncle could hardly cut him off with a shilling.'

She was frowningly silent for a moment, looking at him as if measuring the extent of his illusion. Then she said with an ironic lift in her soft, level voice, 'Oh, but he *could*. Julian was right about that.' She hesitated, looking down and away from him, and then said quickly and with a sudden, trenchant bitterness, 'Johnny can't see it, of course. He never could see anything like that, but Lester dislikes him. Sometimes I think—he hates him.'

Charles felt a cold uneasiness. 'Aren't you being a bit over-dramatic?' he said.

* * *

They met Johnny in the hall. His face glimmered palely in the dusk. Mary said, 'How's Grandfather?' and he answered, after a brief, hesitant glance at Charles, 'He's had another stroke. Not a bad one. He got upset—it was very sudden.'

'Is he conscious?'

'He was, for a little. He knew me, I think.' He paused and went on, bringing out the words with difficulty as if they hurt him. 'The awful thing is—one feels so little. When I was sitting there I felt nothing. No more than a kind of *boredom*. Like waiting for a train to start.'

'Darling, I'm so terribly sorry.' She went up to him as if to touch him and then stopped, uncertainly. He smiled sadly at her, widening his eyes as if they were hurting him and rubbed at them with his forefinger.

She said gently, 'You'll make them sore.'

'Sorry. It's an irritating habit.'

She said, 'Oh,' rather blankly, and then she did take his hand but lightly and nervously as if she were afraid of a rebuff. He blinked at her lovingly enough but they seemed Charles thought, almost more like a brother and sister than man and wife. It was as if a curtain hung between them, fine

enough to admit the daylight of ordinary affection but filtering off the midday glare of stronger passion or grief.

Charles murmured a few stilted words of sympathy that sounded inadequate as they were bound to do and said that of course he would catch the next train back to London.

'No, don't do that,' Johnny said. 'He's had these attacks before—there's nothing anyone can do. Except wait.' He halted and looked uncomfortable. 'I'm terribly sorry—I do see it's absolutely wretched for you.' The apology was genuine; he was really ashamed of inflicting a family worry on an outsider.

Mary said swiftly, 'Do stay. It would make everything much easier.' It sounded heartfelt; she looked shyly at her husband who said, 'Mary finds family gatherings a bit of a strain.'

She laughed a little confusedly as if denying this and admitting it at the same time. 'You must admit—it's not always easy to talk. Too many things are sacred.'

Johnny smiled at her. He put one hand on her shoulder, one hand on Charles's and gently propelled them up the stairs. He said to Charles, 'Julian has a good name for my Aunt Florence. He calls her the Recessive Gene.'

Charles laughed politely though he didn't think it very funny. He remembered that Johnny had always wanted his friends to like each other: if they wouldn't show their paces when he introduced them, Johnny would repeat their stories for them, their *bons mots*. Johnny prized his friends above rubies but he wanted everyone to admire their glitter—like a king displaying the splendour of his court. It was a naïvely endearing quality, only occasionally exasperating. Mary apparently found it exasperating now, because she said, 'Julian always talks smartly about people. There's no need to repeat what he says.'

She spoke with a stern, heavily disapproving air that was funny and touching, Charles thought, because it didn't belong to her: it belonged to some pinched-mouth, middle-aged

woman overheard on a bus. For a moment he wondered if it had been a joke; then he noticed that her hand, trailing lightly on the banisters, was trembling a little.

* * *

In the drawing-room after dinner, shaded lamps bloomed with a delicate light on hands, coffee cups, brandy glasses, leaving faces in shadow. Charles had a pleasant sensation of being marooned on a floating island of warmth and ease from which the rest of the world seemed remote, a land-line distantly glimpsed across a shadowy sea. Dinner had been a slow, comfortable meal. No one had said very much about the old man lying ill upstairs but there had been no strained attempt to avoid the subject either: conversation was naturally muted but perfectly easy and Charles realized when the meal was over that he had half-expected to be bored and had not been. As a result, he was in an uncritical, bland mood in which he felt disposed to like everyone, even Johnny's Aunt Florence, the Recessive Gene. The silly joke remained in his head with the thumping insistence of a popular song and with the same kind of depressing aptness. She was a short, flat-chested woman with a long, long chin and an air of being spiritually involved elsewhere. Her left hand played incessantly with a necklace of painted shells that looked as if it had been bought at some charity bazaar. When they were introduced, she gave Charles the chilly tips of her fingers and said, 'So glad . . .' in a light, choking voice as if she suffered some constriction of the vocal chords. He had decided, at dinner, that she was neither rude, nor grande dame, merely painfully shy, like Clara. He was annoyed when Cloutsham sat beside him, brandy glass held fondly to his waistcoat and said, 'I see you got stuck with Florrie. That was lousy luck.'

'I thought her nice.'

'Hm.' He stuck out his full lower lip. 'Did she tell you the story about Asquith?'

'Yes. It's a good story.'

'The first time, maybe. She has another one. About Lloyd George. And Gladstone dandled her on his knee. She knows a lot of people who used to have influence.' He grinned at his own joke. 'That goes for most of the family. For a whole, dying class.'

The fatuous, rolling relish with which he pronounced this last sentence made Charles realize he was fairly drunk. He glanced nervously round the room but no one was looking at them. Clara was talking to Lester's son, a heavy, charmless young man who had just come down from Cambridge. She was standing with one knee on a chair and her large hands clasped on the back of it. Charles could not hear what she said but caught an occasional, italicized word. *Marvellous, splendid, so wretchedly* something or other . . .

Florence Prothero was displaying the drab piece of tapestry she was working on to a bulky, plain woman in silver lamé, one of those elderly ladies who do some excellent work or other, usually unpaid, and whom Charles had liked, though he could not remember her name.

Johnny's uncle, Lester, was standing by the window with Mary, apparently gazing out into the summer night; a big, solid, heavy-breathing man with a smooth pink face and a monocle screwed into one disingenuous blue eye. He had a menacingly powerful body, short-legged and over-balanced like a wrestler's. He was well dressed, almost a dandy, in his Cheviot tweed suit, velvet waistcoat and regimental tie. His suits were made for him by a famous firm: at dinner he had complained to Charles of the expense but said, 'Where else can you buy clothes?' as if the alternative to Savile Row was nakedness. Watching him, seated between his wife and his niece, Charles had thought that he looked like a peacock between two peahens.

He said, 'I wouldn't have thought Johnny's uncle particularly moribund.'

'Lester? Lord no—he's indestructible.' Cloutsham leaned forward, his eyes held a staring, over-concentration like a

losing chess player's. 'You know—when people talk about the decline of the ruling classes, they ought to take a good, long look at Lester. He's the dinosaur that managed to adapt.' He chuckled, a warm, pleasant sound.

Charles stood up. 'I detest sociological party games,' he said with a rudeness that was due less to Cloutsham's glib nonsense than to a sudden rush of resentment. He guessed that Cloutsham would not have bothered to talk to him if he hadn't found out that Joseph Fraenkel was his uncle. It was a kind of calculation Charles had always detested. He approached the pair by the window, shaken out of his benign mood into one of conscious annoyance. Mary was saying something. Charles caught the tail end of a sentence, '... feel about him as you do.'

Lester said hurriedly, 'My dear girl, that's not fair, y'know. Johnny will always have a home here.' His manner had a touch of paternal contempt in it but something else too—a kind of brusque wistfulness as if he wanted her to like him.

She said, 'Only on sufferance. He . . .'

She saw Charles and stopped. He had had no chance to move away. Her eyes were wide and dark, she gave him a social smile, brilliant with anger. Over her head, Charles and Lester exchanged glances carefully devoid of meaning. To bridge the uneasy moment, Charles asked him a question that rose quite naturally out of a discussion they had had at dinner about the economics of expansion in the magazine industry. Lester launched on an over-long, dull, but highly competent explanation. His firm dealt mainly with trade papers. He ended, 'Of course as far as they are concerned the question of expansion hardly arises. No one except a boilermaker is going to buy the *Boilermaker's Gazette*, don't y'know? There was a boom during the war for other kinds of magazine but it began to level out pretty soon after. There won't be much room for expansion now except in the woman's market.' He glanced at Mary. His eyes had a sleepy, cautious look.

She said, 'And for that, you need bright young women from Somerville, not ex-officers with qualities of leadership?' Her voice held a note of uncertain rebellion.

'More or less, Mary.' Lester took a cigar out of his pocket and examined it with thoughtful interest. Then he cleared his throat and said with brisk kindness, 'Now my dear, Johnny has got a good start. Believe me. Simpson will show him the ropes. We all have to go through the mill, y'know. *I* had to.' This thought seemed to stiffen him. 'If Johnny wasn't prepared to do that, he should have gone into the Army, what?' He had a habit of barking 'what' or 'doncher know' at the end of his sentences. Though he had, in fact, recently retired from the Rifle Brigade, it made him sound like a ham actor playing the part of a military gentleman.

Mary lifted her chin as if to challenge the world. It was a very young gesture: she looked like a proud, stubborn child. She said, 'Is that the only alternative to being pushed around?' Charles remembered the way she had said earlier, 'Too many things are sacred' and guessed that this was something she could not bear.

Lester's gaze fixed on a point above her head. It was a habit, Charles noted, that he shared with Johnny who also preferred to ignore remarks in bad taste. Then he laughed shortly. 'That or a private income,' he said.

It was a punishing remark. Charles, who was not easily moved, found that he could not bear the look on Mary's face.

He said angrily, 'A private income would seem the *only* alternative. Since they dropped the atom bomb, the Army is no longer an occupation for gentlemen.' He did not know how Lester took this, he was looking at Mary, and felt ridiculously pleased to see her smile. He went on as if Lester wasn't there, 'What sort of job is Johnny doing now?'

'Writing editorials for a magazine on agricultural implements.'

Her voice rang out in silence. Charles saw with a cold,

premonitory shock, that the room had emptied suddenly. Only Clara and Julian Cloutsham remained, staring at Johnny who was standing in the doorway. He was pale, tired, strikingly like his sister—the flesh drawn, ironed taut across the narrow, beautiful bone structure of his face. He said, 'Lester . . .'

Lester's head was thrust down and forward like a bull's. The enormous strength of his heavy body seemed suddenly to dominate the room. His whole personality had changed with Johnny's appearance, Charles thought, though it was a change that was difficult to gauge exactly. It was as if he had suddenly become the sort of person Charles had half expected him to be: cold, arrogant, almost brutal.

He said in a peremptory voice, 'What is it?' and then, without waiting for an answer, threw up his head and marched towards the door. He seized Johnny's arm and wheeled him smartly out of the room.

The door stayed open. There was a subdued murmur of angry words. Then the murmur broke into frightening coherence. Lester said, 'Oh God . . . oh my God . . . did it have to be *you*?'

Johnny said something, a woman answered and then Lester's voice exploded like a bursting shell. 'Damn you, damn your soul to hell.' They heard his feet thundering up the stairs.

Clara began to cry. She was standing next to Cloutsham whose arm lightly encircled her waist. The tears ran down her face and she made no attempt to wipe them away.

Johnny came back, slowly, a little way into the room, looking round him with a lost, dazed air as if he saw nothing familiar there. Clara ran to him awkwardly, he put his hands gently on her shoulders and said, 'He's dead. It happened so quickly. There wasn't time. . . .'

She clung to him, after a second he disengaged her hands gently and handed her back to Cloutsham like a parcel.

Then he came over to Charles. He said with a trained,

held-down, almost desperate politeness, 'I'm terribly sorry. This is hideous for you. We didn't expect it. He'd seemed better . . . he just went off in his sleep.'

Mary said, 'Lester . . .'

'He's very upset.' He answered her quietly and evenly. His eyes flickered unhappily at Charles. 'It's unfortunate. My grandfather refused to see him this afternoon. It didn't mean anything, he was so ill, but Lester took it very hard. . . '

Mary whispered, 'He hates you.' Her hands were clenched and held out a little in front of her as if to ward off something. Her face wore a look of frozen horror, as if she had just woken from a nightmare and found it was true.

Johnny smiled, a glimmer, a slight movement of the set mouth under the fair moustache. 'Don't be silly, love. He was desperately hurt . . . he loved his father so. People say things they don't mean.'

'Not Lester.' She shivered suddenly and broke out, 'You can never *see*, can you? It's inconceivable to you that anyone should resent you.' Her voice was shrill.

Johnny winced. 'Well—perhaps. But there never seemed any point in looking for trouble.' He took her arm and shook it, smiling at her gently but humorously as if he were comforting a child. After a minute she smiled back at him, not like a child at all but with a sad, intense anxiety.

* * *

Charles felt miserably confused. Clearly he had to leave but the last train was certainly gone. Cloutsham had left the room with Clara; now he came back, looked at Charles with his pale, disdainful eyes and said, 'D'you want a lift back to town?'

Charles accepted gratefully, a little disgusted with himself. Everyone has his pet illusion: Charles believed that he could never be unnerved by a simple, social dilemma. He crept upstairs guiltily as a thief, obsessed by the fear that he might meet one of the family. He glimpsed the nurse at the far end

of the corridor and heard voices through a half-open door, but to his huge relief he met no one face to face.

When he came down, they were talking in low voices by Cloutsham's car, a long, racy, adventurous affair with monstrous horns and headlamps. Cloutsham opened the passenger door. Charles shook Johnny's hand and rather evasively gabbled condolences. He felt he could not bear it if Johnny started to apologize for the abortive week-end.

But apparently there were limits even to Johnny's sense of social obligation. He seemed limply relaxed in the grey aftermath of emotion. 'He was old and tired,' he said. 'It was the best thing.'

Charles got into the car. Cloutsham swung in beside him, wearing a pair of glasses with yellow lenses. He said to Johnny, 'Don't let Lester get you down.' He spoke simply, soberly, without any mocking undertone.

'I won't.' Johnny half smiled, stepped back from the car.

But Cloutsham hadn't finished. He leaned across Charles. 'Look—in case the job should fold up, think over what we talked about. I think something can be worked out.' His yellow-moon gaze swung from Johnny to his wife and he added, with a return of his bantering manner, 'You've got to live, you know.'

She said nothing but turned her head slightly so that the light from the doorway showed a gleam of something—surprise or derision—in her eyes. Johnny smiled rather remotely. 'It's not the only thing.'

Cloutsham gave a sudden, merry laugh as if something had really amused him. He started the engine and they drove off. As they got to the end of the drive Charles turned and saw Johnny, silhouetted against the light, his hand raised in a formal gesture of farewell.

THE offices of the *Agricultural Gazette* were on the fifth floor of the Larch and Hartshorn building, a tall steel and glass block put up by the firm in the 'twenties when it had been Larch and Prothero. The first four floors were occupied by the directors' offices and the bigger and glossier trade papers. The lift stopped at the fourth floor, so did the carpets, the attractive secretaries and the walnut desks. The fifth floor was dark and stuffy, heavily partitioned and furnished with old filing cabinets and back numbers of all the company's magazines. The staff of the *Gazette* consisted of one middle-aged typist with marrow-shaped breasts dangling loosely behind nylon blouses or lacy-knit sweaters, an uppity office boy who could get a new job any day of the week and Simpson who couldn't—Simpson who had once been the office boy himself and worked his way up to editor; Simpson with his pigeon toes and crippling bunions and sad, fanatical eyes; Simpson who had run the monthly paper single-handed for years with a jealously absorbed devotion and who neither wanted nor needed an editorial assistant.

In fact there was not very much to do and what there was Johnny found dull and rather pointless, although he tried to ignore this in the same way that he tried to ignore the fact that Simpson resented him—had bitterly resented him from the moment Lester had marched his nephew into the office, introduced him in his most paternally autocratic manner and said in his hoarse, plummy voice, 'Simpson will show you the ropes.'

When he did think about it, Johnny told himself that it was bound to be difficult, at first, to find your feet in civilian life. He knew perfectly well that the Air Force had suited him better than anything else was easily likely to do. He had been

prepared for a certain loss of simplicity and vigour. What he had not expected was that he would feel such an incredibly deep gulf between everything he had known—his boyhood, his education, his years as a pilot—and the present. Sometimes the past seemed no more than a wildly unrelated dream, the kind of dream you wake from empty and depressed, because nothing in the everyday world can quite match up to it.

The morning he had the row with Simpson, he was sitting in his cubicle, a partition off the main office, writing the editorial for the October issue. He wrote slowly, quite competently, and was tolerably pleased with what he had written. He typed it out himself, laboriously, on the old Olivetti that had been discarded by one of the third-floor offices, partly because he had nothing else to do and partly because Simpson objected if he asked for the services of the secretary. When he had finished he read it through, made one or two careful alterations and took it to Simpson's office.

Simpson was reading galleys. Without looking up, he stretched out his hand for the typed page. Johnny gave it to him, hesitated for a moment and then went back to his own desk, leaving the cubicle door open. He waited, re-arranged his papers and tore last month's page off the calendar. It was an idyllic country scene, a photograph of a boy playing by a trout stream with meadows and a wood behind. Underneath there was a four-line verse.

Johnny looked at the picture and thought, for no particular reason, of his grandfather. It was just over two months since his death. Johnny sighed, crumpled the page of the calendar and threw it into the waste paper basket. He looked out of the small window, almost totally obscured by dusty piles of old *Gazettes*, at the cold courtyard well. The sun had been shining when he walked to the office but there was no way of knowing if it was still shining now. There were lights burning in the windows across the well. The light was on in his own cubicle, the yellow shade covered with corpses of flies and the bulb dark with grease. He wondered

if Simpson would think him over-fastidious if he fitted a new bulb.

Simpson's chair squeaked. Then his shoes. He came into the cubicle and threw the editorial down on Johnny's desk. 'This is bloody useless,' he said.

For the first time for years, Johnny felt the blood burn in his cheeks. He said, 'I'm sorry.'

'Didn't you know it was?'

Johnny shook his head, his eyes fixed on his desk. 'I'm sorry.'

'Sorry, what?' Simpson said. Suddenly his voice shook with anger. 'My name's Simpson. *Mr.* Simpson to you. I'm fed up with your bloody impertinence.' He swallowed. 'Do it again. And this time, give your mind to it, for Christ's sake.'

'I'll try, Mr. Simpson,' Johnny said.

Simpson hesitated. Briefly, he looked almost pathetic, clutching his bitterness to him like a child clutches a battered toy. 'Get on with it,' he finished and went out of the cubicle slamming the door.

The door provided only a visual privacy. The partition walls were matchboard thin: Johnny could hear every time Simpson coughed, every time his stomach rumbled extra loudly. He stared at the door and picked up the editorial, his hands trembling slightly. It was the first time dislike had shown itself so openly. Up to now, there had only been petty pinpricks, minor outbursts of truculent authority, that Johnny had taught himself to endure with a tolerant detachment. He had even been sorry for Simpson: he had a rather exaggerated respect for the difficulties of men who were less fortunate than himself. Simpson was old, he probably saw him as a threat.

Now humiliation sat like a cold stone in his stomach. He read the page through, wondering what it was Simpson had expected him to do. He reached for a back copy of the magazine and looked at the leading article carefully. Then he re-typed his own piece, changing the shape of the paragraphs,

altering a word here and there. It seemed less satisfactory than before. He read it again, feeling blank and stupid and ripped it out of the typewriter. He glanced at his watch and decided that he would be able to think more clearly after lunch.

Simpson was sitting at his desk in the main office. In front of him were the glass of milk the secretary fetched for him each noon and the packet of sandwiches he always brought from home. He looked up silently as Johnny took his hat from the stand, looped his umbrella over his arm.

Simpson cleared his throat. 'Where are you going?'

'To lunch.'

'Have you finished?'

'No. I'll get down to it afterwards.' Johnny smiled, a good-tempered smile. He imagined that Simpson must be feeling wretchedly embarrassed—*he* would be, and wanted to reassure him. He said in a friendly, jocular way, 'I need a bit of stimulus.'

For a moment Simpson said nothing. His eyes travelled over Johnny with a bright, intransigent stare, taking in the smile, the gentle condescension, the suit that must have cost, he reckoned, at least fifty pounds. 'Where are you lunching?' he asked in a mincing voice.

Johnny hesitated, pricked by a faint, undefined doubt. 'Rules,' he said.

Simpson took a bite from his sandwich, pushed away his empty glass of milk and gave his concentrated attention to the manuscripts on his desk. His jaws munched steadily. Then he belched.

At the door, Johnny said defensively, 'I'll be back in an hour.'

Simpson looked up at him with an affected expression of elaborate surprise as if he had only just discovered his presence.

'Oh—go and be damned to you,' he said.

Johnny was seized by a violent, shaking rage. He had a

terrible desire to kill Simpson, to put his hands round the stringy, undernourished throat and squeeze—it would be as easy as squeezing an orange. He clenched his fists at his sides and closed his eyes, sickened and appalled.

‘All right,’ he said, controlling himself with an enormous effort. ‘All right, Mr. Simpson. I’ll go for good.’

‘Oh—go to buggery,’ Simpson said.

* * *

An antique grandfather clock stood in one corner of the ante-room to the director’s offices. It had a fat, melancholy tick and decorated numbers in green and gold that were difficult to read. Johnny stared at it and realized that it was an hour slow. He wondered who on earth had put it there and then, in the same instant, wondered what *he* was doing there. A sense of numb unreality descended upon him. He stared bleakly at Lester’s secretary, a plump, nubile girl in a black sweater, when she came to fetch him.

Lester was sitting behind his desk, a polished expanse of good red leather, smiling his bland, welcoming smile. ‘Well Johnny,’ he said. ‘What can I do for you?’ He sounded a jovial Father Christmas, ready to pull down absolutely any present off the tree.

‘I’ve resigned my job.’ He explained quickly, giving only the bare bones of the quarrel. His anger had retreated a little and he wanted to be fair to Simpson. He saw no reason in the world why he should need to justify his own behaviour.

Lester’s bald face was expressionless. He took a cigar out of his breast pocket and pierced it impatiently.

‘Let me get this straight. You had a disagreement with Simpson because you didn’t do a job to his liking. Right?’

‘Disagreement’s a polite word to use.’

‘I daresay. Simpson’s a tough old bastard.’ Lester gave a short, approving laugh. He turned on Johnny his blue, veiled stare. ‘I suppose you’re not used to being sworn at by someone who isn’t a gentleman?’

The sneer was deliberate. Johnny felt, not anger, but the dull sense of guilt his uncle could still arouse in him. It was something that went back to his boyhood, to the time he had been living in his grandfather's house and Lester had come home on leave from the Army. He had always been a big, ugly man with a loud, arrogant voice and a thick, hard body that bulged aggressively through his clothes. Johnny had been a little afraid of him, for a reason that was not quite the ordinary young boy's fear of the strong, domineering male. He had felt, in his uncle's presence, a kind of haunted, bewildered shame as if he had done something to offend him and did not know what it was.

He said, 'It wasn't quite like that.'

'I'm sure it wasn't.' Lester's manner switched, became almost too affable, a form of egregious apology. 'I can see old Simpson could be fearfully difficult to deal with. Particularly from a subordinate capacity.' He laughed quite benignly. 'Actually, to be honest with you,'—he drew on his cigar and squinted at the glowing end—'we wouldn't be sorry to pension him off. The *Gazette* could do with someone a bit less hidebound, y'know? We'd like to attract more advertising, for example, but if you mention new layouts to Simpson his hair stands on end. The trouble is, these old stagers get dug in, built into the foundations, you might say. And they're just about as easy to shift.'

'I should think he runs the *Gazette* competently enough,' Johnny said with just enough contempt for it to be visible to his uncle. 'What do you want to advertise in it? Corsets?'

Lester frowned. 'All r-r-right. Point taken. But tell me this. Apart from this incident, have you any complaints against him?' He waved a solid white hand. 'Of course, this is off the record, don't y'know?'

Johnny felt bemused and a little disgusted at the openness of this invitation. He thought unreasonably, poor old devil, if they pension him off, it'll break his heart. He said, 'None.'

As I said, he's quite competent. We just didn't see eye to eye, that's all.'

'I see.' Lester looked at him half-regretfully. 'Well, I can only say I'm sorry about it. I'm not sure, y'know, that we can fit you in anywhere else at the moment. Unless, of course, Simpson were to leave. . . .'

'I don't think this kind of journalism is really my line. Johnny was conscious of an enormous relief as he said this.

Lester sighed. 'Perhaps it isn't.' He paused. 'What about that advertising job? I know you packed it in, but I daresay something could be worked out if you decided to change your mind. I could have a word with Bill Stanford. We play golf together sometimes. He's a bit rough, certainly, sometimes he acts like the village idiot,'—he smiled broadly—'but he's got a damn good business head. It's a big firm and a rich one.'

Johnny smiled with deliberate amiability. 'With hundreds of little Stanfords jostling each other for seats on the board?' He thought this was the sort of reason likely to impress his uncle.

'I daresay. But he'll always find a place for the right man. Naturally, you'd have to sweat it out for a bit.'

Johnny said quickly, 'I don't want to spend the rest of my life selling things to people who don't want them. I'm not a hawker.'

Lester muttered, 'Well, if you're so sure you can pick and choose. . . .' He looked at Johnny with baffled concern. 'Have you anything else in mind? Not that I want to pry.'

'Nothing definite.' Johnny hesitated, reluctant to leave his uncle with the impression that he would have to peddle himself round on the open market. He said, 'Julian's suggested something. I'm not awfully clear about the details, but he's bought a small import and export concern—or, rather, a controlling interest in it. He wants me to go in with him.'

Lester said heartily, 'Cloutsham? Oh yes—he's done well for himself here and there, hasn't he? I was talking to

Harling the other day and he mentioned him.' A doubtful look came into his eyes suddenly, as if he wasn't altogether happy about something. He shot out his thick wrist and looked at his watch. 'What about lunch? Why don't you come along to my club and talk things over?' He had slid completely into his role of bluff, kindly uncle: his manner was persuasive, almost excessively genial.

'It's awfully nice of you, but I'm lunching already. With Julian, as a matter of fact. I'm pretty late already.'

'You should have told me.' Lester stood up energetically, clapped his heavy hand affectionately on Johnny's shoulder as they walked to the lift. He insisted, at every door, that Johnny should precede him.

In the lift he said, 'How are Mary and the boy?'

'Terribly well.'

'Good. He's a charming lad.' He went on with studied vagueness, 'You haven't brought him down to Fitchet for a long time. We'd like to see him, y'know. Do him good, too, to get some decent air.'

He pressed the ground-floor button, the whirr of the lift made Johnny's silence less embarrassing. Lester shouted, 'I wish you'd let me buy him that pony.'

This was easier to answer. 'It's very good of you. But Mary feels he oughtn't to have things we can't afford to give him.' He smiled, not very comfortably, thinking of Mary's unwillingness to visit Fitchet. Lester was almost certainly aware of it too.

The lift stopped at the ground floor and the doors slid open. They walked across the marble-floored lobby to the entrance. The sun assaulted their eyes with a shock that was almost pain.

'What a marvellous day,' Johnny said.

'It's been a good summer.' Lester glared under his brows at a pretty girl tittuping along the pavement in a hobble skirt. Still watching her, he said, 'I had a letter from your mother the other day. She'll be upset to hear you've decided

to leave us. I daresay she'll blame *me*.' He laughed in a rather embarrassed way: he was oddly nervous of his sister. 'Look—don't do anything in a hurry. Take a week to think it over, longer if you like. I'll have a word with Hartshorn. Meanwhile, I shouldn't say anything at home, if I were you.

'But that's ridiculous.'

'Is it?' Lester swivelled his head round and gave Johnny a straight, hard look as if he were sighting him along the barrel of a gun. 'Mary will worry herself sick, won't she?'

Johnny said curtly, 'She worries quite unnecessarily.' Then he added more gently, ashamed to snub what seemed a quite real concern, 'You're right, of course. She'll probably think we're bound to end up in the gutter.'

They both laughed indulgently. 'What does she think you ought to do?' Lester asked.

'I think something *definite*.' His face lit with an amused tenderness. 'She'd like me to be a doctor or a solicitor—any profession that you have to pass an exam to be qualified for. She's got a great respect for little pieces of paper. She'd like me to have gone to a university.'

Lester smiled. 'That's hardly much of a qualification, I should think. Any Tom, Dick or Harry can go up to the 'Varsity nowadays. Still—she's very loyal.' He spoke dryly as if this was not altogether a compliment. 'All the same, I shouldn't tell her. Not till you've made up your mind.'

He lifted his hand in a half salute and turned on his heel. Johnny watched him walking down the street with a heavy, rolling gait. Then he flagged a taxi, said, 'Rules, Maiden Lane,' and jumped in. His face had lightened with relief so that he looked very young—a boy, almost, let out of school.

6

MARTIN had fallen in the playground and cut his cheek open on a broken milk bottle. 'I want Daddy to come home and see my stitch. Tell him it was an enormous piece of glass,' he said. He lay on the sofa, his head resting on his grandmother's arm, one cheek puckered and angry, the other pale and slippery with tears. His eyes, golden like Johnny's, were bright with exhaustion and pride.

'I'll tell him,' Mary promised. She smiled, over his head, at Johnny's mother, Christine, and dialled the number of the *Gazette*. She said, 'Can I speak to Mr. Prothero, please?'

The line was bad. Above the crackles, the secretary's voice was light and distant. 'I'm sorry, he isn't here any more.'

Mary thought she must have misheard. 'Perhaps you'll give him a message, then. This is Mrs. Prothero.'

'Oh. I see.' There was a pause. Mary heard her speak to someone else in the room and a man's voice answering. Then the woman said, 'I'm so sorry, Mrs. Prothero. But he left the firm a week ago.' She breathed in and out in a noisy, agitated way like the hand pump of an old chapel organ. 'Can I transfer you to Sir Lester? He may know where to get hold of him.'

'No thank you.' Mary's eyes flew nervously to Christine. She had a queer little fear that she might, by some miracle of acoustics, have been able to hear both sides of the conversation, but her head was bent serenely over the comic Martin had demanded she should read to him. Mary put the receiver down with a feeling of guilt. She felt as if she had been caught prying into a room where she had no right to be.

Martin looked up. 'Is Daddy there?' he said fretfully.

'Not at the moment, darling. They're trying to find him.'

'I had two stitches.' He yawned, his fawn's eyes drifting with tiredness.

'He's nearly asleep,' Christine whispered.

Mary picked him up. He was very light; carrying him into the bedroom the fragility of his bones excited her half-frightened love. She wanted to kiss his beautiful head and hold him close for hours.

He closed his eyes and fell asleep almost at once—too quickly. It would have been better if she could have read to him, sung, anything that would have held back the tide of angry bewilderment rising within her. She moved round the room, closing the curtains, aimlessly picking up his toys. Then she stood still. There seemed to be no sound in the room except her own thudding heart.

She said, half aloud, 'There must be some mistake,' and stood, frowning, testing this possibility with a shrinking hopefulness like a swimmer testing icy water with a toe. But the water is always cold; she relinquished the faint hope with a sigh. There was no reason why the secretary should have been mistaken. Johnny had left the firm. If he had simply transferred to another magazine he would have told her. And he had not told her. Thoughts developed slowly in her mind like a photograph coming to life in an acid tank.

She had known the job was not suiting him. When she asked him about it he had shrugged and said it would do until something better turned up. His attitude had shocked her. She had been brought up to believe that every job was to be taken seriously. She had said, irritated, 'I don't see what you want,' and he had smiled at her. 'Power, love,' he had said lightly. 'The moon on toast. What do you think?'

He had made her laugh but she had not understood. Her standards were to some extent still limited to what, in the suburban road she grew up in, were the ultimate ambitions, a nice home, a good job. It was a world in which the new car, the visit to the theatre, the holiday abroad, opened up new

and splendid horizons. The notion of power never came into the reckoning. *They* made laws and wars. Power was what other people had and wielded over you, unquestioned.

Quite simply, she did not see what Johnny had to grumble at. She was still impressed by the climate of his life, his mother's icy standards—expressed by a passing word, a lift of the eyebrows—the easy way they both talked about money, not as a daily, nagging threat, only, occasionally, as a distant cloud on the horizon. They both spoke, grave-faced, of poverty, but only as they would have talked of love or justice or any other abstraction. It had no connection in their minds with penny-pinching shabbiness or fear. Mary had no idea how much money Christine gave Johnny but she knew they lived in a way no salary of his could entitle them to. Christine paid for Martin's school, for Johnny's car, and they lived, rent-free in the basement of the house that had belonged to Sir George and been left to his daughter as her share of the estate.

'The upkeep must be a great worry to Johnny,' Christine said when Mary went back into the drawing room. She had been bending to inspect a patch of rising damp that had appeared in the corner of the room. When she straightened up, she gave a little gasp as at a sudden twinge of pain. Mary thought she looked ill but knew that she would hate to be asked what was wrong with her. She was a proud, reserved woman who never used any make-up as if denying that there could be any improvement in her pale, papery skin dried out by years in India; her eyes, sunk deep beneath a high, imperious forehead were a very light, cold blue as if the sun had faded them. She was clever: she got her books not from Boots but from the London Library and she had once written a biography of her great-uncle who had been a governor in some long-relinquished post of Empire. Mary suspected that her reputation for cleverness did not rest on this literary excursion but on her habit of saying quite ordinary things in a very decisive voice. Mary was amused by her and shyly

fond of her, though Christine inhibited her natural frankness and sometimes made her feel trivial.

'It's the drains,' she said. 'They need seeing to.'

Christine looked at her briefly, with her pale, sufficient stare. It was the way she looked at the world, Mary felt, weighing it up and finding it wanting.

'You must move that bookcase,' she said. 'It might be damaged by the damp. It's a fine piece. It belonged to my mother.'

She ran her fingers lightly over the veneered surface, not looking for dust, but lovingly. Generations of colonial servants, justly bearing the white man's burden, had formed her attitudes: she felt it her inherited duty to keep an eye on things. When Mary broke a piece of china Christine had given them, she felt, not simply careless, but as if she had failed on some higher moral plane.

'Johnny was going to move it last night, but we forgot,' she said guiltily.

'You must be very busy,' Christine said. 'Running this big flat. . . .' There was some lack of conviction in her tone. She came from a long line of female reformers and thought it a sin for women to be idle. They should sit on committees, send telegrams to the Prime Minister.

'I have nothing else to do,' Mary said apologetically.

'I suppose not.' Christine smiled, one of her rare, unqualified smiles. 'I don't know how you manage so beautifully without servants. But you must get bored sometimes. It would be different if you lived in the country.' She sighed. 'Johnny is a countryman at heart.'

'A country squire, you mean.'

'Perhaps.' She sighed again: for some reason, her mood was less crisp than usual. 'My father would have liked, you know, to leave Fitchet to Johnny. It was impossible, of course, but I wish he could have done something for him. My husband's family were poor as mice and we all expected it. Although, as it turned out, death duties were so

enormous.' Thoughtfully, she traced the pattern on the wood of the bookcase with a claw-like finger. 'It's hard to get used to the idea that one's children will have to scrape a living.' She spoke with sudden, sad indignation. 'People should do jobs that interest or fulfil them. Not in order to pay the rent or the greengrocer.'

She stood, head bent, old and delicate as her furniture, and for a moment Mary glimpsed what her world had been, cosy as Cranford, unreal as a fairy tale. Once upon a time, some people had been able to live and think like this. They were good people, they had standards of a sweet, old-fashioned sort, they knew their duty and they carried baskets of soup to the poor man at their gate. As Christine turned towards her and said, 'Don't listen to my grumbles. Old people have to get used to the world changing,' Mary heard behind her words a fading, ghostly ballad and felt, with a stab of pain, the sadness of every autumn.

Then Christine said, 'Now what about this job Johnny has with Lester?' and she felt suddenly cold, almost physically sick. It was as if her body had accepted the fact of Johnny's deception while her mind lagged behind, in a state of utter disbelief.

'I'm not sure. It's only a beginning, of course.'

'I hope it works. Lester has changed you know. From the moment he left the Army he became a fly business man with an eye for the main chance. He's a chameleon.' She stopped and looked tired. She liked discussing people's characters, passing judgement with a sigh, a word, a dismissing shrug, but today she had no bite. She sat down. 'Of course it may lead to something,' she went on in the hopeful voice of any parent considering a young man's chances. She gave Mary a sharp look and added, apparently irrelevantly, 'You know there won't be much when I die. I have to provide for Clara.'

Mary said awkwardly, 'You mustn't talk about dying.'

She answered with a return of her old vigour. 'Why not?

It doesn't worry me. Death is the price you pay for living. She smiled in the speculative way that heralded an anecdote. 'My daily once said she'd lost her husband a few years before. So, thinking I knew the idiom, I said, how sad, what did he die of? But I was wrong. She had *lost* him, at a fair on Hampstead Heath. Missed him in the crowd, went home and waited, but he never turned up again.' Mary laughed and she jumped, distractedly, to another subject. 'How is your father, dear? I like your father.'

She often said this and it was probably true though there was sometimes an emphasis in her voice that would not have been there if Mary's father had been a gentleman. Actually, Christine appeared to enjoy his company and in many ways they were astonishingly alike: both grotesques, iron individualists, staunch supporters of any government in power, fanatical believers in the Empire. Occasionally, when he said things like, 'Well, I mustn't grumble. I've got my health and that's the main thing,' there was a mocking gleam in Christine's eye, but for the most part she seemed to respect his simplicity, his fierce independence. He was no man's servant. He kept his own hours in his small surgery at the back of the stationer's shop in the High Street and enjoyed his work there—he believed you could tell a man's character from his feet. In the evenings he went to a prayer meeting at the chapel or stayed at home, reading paperbacks and listening to Bach on the radiogram.

Mary said, 'He doesn't come here much. He hates travelling, even just a short way on the tube. He says he's getting too old.'

'We're none of us getting any younger.' The platitude, with its archly solemn wisdom, came oddly from her. But she seemed unconscious of it, leaning back in her chair and looking suddenly rather yellow and old. 'As I was saying,' she began slowly, her eyes pinned on the wall beyond Mary, 'I have to provide for Clara. But now Johnny's future seems settled, I'd like to put the little sum I had set aside for you

both into a trust fund for Martin's education. Johnny wants him to go to his old school, doesn't he?'

She looked at Mary shyly, a humble old woman's look, apologizing, Mary realized with horror, for cutting them out of her will. She sought frantically for something to say but Christine went on hurriedly, anxious to close an embarrassing subject. 'Johnny does hate this sort of discussion so. But I'd like to get it settled. Perhaps, as Johnny's working for him now, it might be a good thing to ask Lester to be one of the trustees.'

She looked suddenly immensely fragile, easily damaged. It was unthinkable that she should be allowed to go innocently to Lester with her little proposition. Mary felt a rush of pity and indignation. The situation was ridiculous and farcical: it was shameful of Johnny to have created it. She felt, at that moment, no anxiety for him at all, no sense of doom. And if she had, it could never have broken through her resentment, through the looming cloud of anger.

'I'm sure Lester won't mind,' she said. 'But perhaps you should leave it a week or two. Talk it over with a solicitor first.'

Christine looked surprised but she was more flexible than usual. 'Perhaps I will,' she said. 'You are always so sensible, dear.'

* * *

At first, after Christine had gone, Mary felt nothing more complicated than slightly angry astonishment. The issue seemed quite straightforward: Johnny had deceived her, in effect, *lied* to her—Johnny, whose probity was almost unnatural, he would never cheat the customs or tell a social fib, to save trouble. But a little later, when Martin was settled for the night and she was waiting and watching the clock, bewilderment succeeded to a kind of personal shame: she had lived with Johnny for eight years and she had no idea at all why he should have deceived her.

They had never been close. Johnny had too many defences against intimacy. He wasn't shy: he simply hated any intrusion into the hard core of his privacy. Earlier in their marriage this reserve had hurt and angered her. She was naturally quick-tempered and she had tried to quarrel with him, using any silly excuse to try and drag him into an ordinary, warm, human row—hating the way that he would never lose his temper, unable to bear that he should keep any part of himself separate and aloof from her, jealous of what seemed a kind of cold, emotional chastity. But he would never quarrel. When she gibbered at him like a furious monkey, he laughed, lightly and affectionately. She had never been quite sure what she wanted of him—he was never anything less than kind and loving. She was only vaguely and half-guiltily conscious that there was something missing somewhere.

* * *

He came home that evening at the normal time, neat and assured in his clerical grey suit, the gold-initialled pigskin briefcase his mother had given him under his arm. His smile crinkled the skin round his eyes and he kissed her, as he always did, a peck on the cheek. 'Hallo love,' he said. 'Had a good day?'

'Martin cut his face at school. It had to be stitched.'

'Poor little chap. Is he awake?'

'No. The doctor gave him a sedative. They said he was awfully brave. He didn't cry till he got home.'

'Good boy.' His face fell into the conventional lines of pride and approval. The confident young executive, she thought, casually applauding his son's bravery though it was unthinkable that he should be anything else but brave.

Mary said, 'Did you have a good day?' She wondered if she caught a wary gleam in his eye. A trembling excitement seized her.

'So-so. Tiring, you know.'

He yawned, the weary business man, and her excitement

ebbed, leaving her cold and oddly ashamed. It seemed suddenly that to catch him out in a lie would be as indecent as spying on a modest spinster in the bathroom.

'Like a drink?' he asked.

She nodded.

'Good,' he said enthusiastically, for all the world as if they didn't usually have a drink, at this hour, every day. He turned to the corner cupboard to get the gin and the glasses and said, his back to her, 'I had lunch with Julian today. He sent you his regards.' He turned round with a defensive smile. 'Why don't you like him, love?'

He had never asked her that before. She said uneasily, 'Oh—I don't know. I don't have to like him, do I?'

He shook his head and gave her her drink, looking rather worried and depressed. 'Of course not. But you've simply made up your mind about him, haven't you?'

This direct criticism surprised her. He went on, quite urgently, 'You haven't anything real against him, have you? Isn't it just prejudice? I mean,'—he looked apologetic—'you have awfully set ideas on how people should behave and the sort of jobs they should do and you dismiss Julian because he doesn't fit into them. Isn't that it?'

'Perhaps. Part of it, anyway. He's not a *serious* person, is he?' Johnny raised his eyebrows and she added quickly, 'He doesn't stick to anything. There was that holiday camp he was running somewhere in Spain—and then that business of buying and selling money in Tangiers. Why doesn't he do a decent job instead of playing about with sordid little schemes?'

'They were all perfectly respectable business ventures, love.' He laughed outright. 'He's made a lot of money.'

She said angrily, 'I don't like barrow boys.'

'That's not fair.'

'Isn't that all he is? A barrow boy with an old school tie.'

Johnny said in a low voice, 'Not everyone is lucky enough to have a high moral purpose, you know.'

She felt obscurely guilty as if she had been pretending to

virtues she did not possess. She tried to laugh. 'I always overstate my case, don't I? I don't really dislike Julian. He's awfully easy to like. That's half the trouble.'

He seemed relieved, as if she had conceded something. 'He's an awfully decent chap,' he said seriously. 'There was a time when I was particularly grateful to him.' He looked at her shyly. 'That was the last term I was at school, the beginning of the war. It was a hellish time—most of the chaps I knew were just that little bit older than me and had shot straight off into the Army or something. There was nothing to do except moon about and wait for the weeks to go by. I read a lot of poetry, I remember—it's funny, that was the only time I ever *did* read much. There was a thing of Housman's—about a man who didn't want sweethearts, or foes to conquer, but friends to die for. He found his friends but he couldn't die for them. "They sought and found six feet of ground, and there they died for me." ' He gave her an ashamed look and she saw, uncomfortably moved, that there was a shine of tears in his eyes. 'I don't suppose I've got it right but it was something I felt—oh, unbearably. It meant an awful lot to know other people felt like that. Of course I didn't tell anyone how I felt—except Julian. He was in the Navy already. He came down to see me once or twice. We went out and he cheered me up and told me not to worry, that I'd soon be out of that snob factory—typical of Julian, that. It was frightfully decent of him to bother. He didn't have much leave.'

There was a stupid lump in her throat. She said, 'Men feel differently about their friends from the way women do, don't they? They don't have to approve of them to like them.'

'Julian would never let anyone down.'

'Perhaps not. There's no need to give him the chance.' His expression was hurt and she burst out with a cutting edge of anger, 'We don't have to talk about him all night, do we?'

'No. I only wanted . . .' He stopped and said, 'Do you feel all right, love? You're pale.'

His care for her physical well-being suddenly seemed an

affront. It gave her courage. She finished her drink and set the glass down. 'Can you take the afternoon off, the day after tomorrow? Martin has what they call an Open Day. Parents are expected to turn up and look at the handwork.'

Johnny frowned, took his diary out of his waistcoat pocket and flicked over the pages. In the second before he answered she had an intense feeling of shame at having asked the question. It was like leaving jewellery about to tempt a thief.

He pursed his lips and said judiciously, 'I might be able to manage it but I can't be sure. Must go carefully with that sort of thing. Show I'm trying to be a good boy.'

He grinned, a wry, mischievous grin, any husband admitting to any wife his deplorable but unnecessary wage slavery, and she was chilled. Not because he was cheating her, but because he was cheating himself. She felt the kind of embarrassed anguish people feel when the upright old gentleman slips on the banana skin or when someone of value and dignity gets weeping, tearing drunk.

Something must have shown in her face because he said, 'Darling—sure you're all right?'

'Yes. Of course.'

He smiled at her as he stood up and it seemed, suddenly, that her deception was infinitely worse than his. She could not imagine what he would do if he found out that she knew the truth and had not told him. Her own cowardice bewildered her. She said, 'What did you do today?'

As soon as she had spoken she was terrified, but he simply said, 'I went to the office. What do you think?'

She gabbled hastily, 'I only meant—did you have a witty lunch with important people? Or is that an illusion common to all wives?'

He looked at her curiously. 'But I told you. I lunched with Julian.'

Her laughter sounded to her own ears as lonely and cheerless as the tinkling of metal bird-scarers on a drenched field. She had the feeling that they were moving in two separate

worlds, each clearly visible to the other but impossible of access: they might have been mouthing at each other through sound-proof glass. 'How stupid of me,' she said.

7

FOR several days, of course, she had hope. Not that she would dare to tackle him outright—shame, and fear of his shame, had killed that hope in the beginning. For most of the time she hoped in the stunned, idiot way people hope when something has happened that they cannot bear to face: if they shut their eyes tightly enough and for long enough everything will miraculously be as it was before. Occasionally she hoped, more rationally, that he would simply explain to her. That hope rose every morning when he came to breakfast, bathed and smiling, ready for the day. Once he had gone, it faded until he was due home at night and she heard his step on the stair. Hope was highest then, with the evening stretching before them; she was hopeful every time he began a sentence, every time he was silent, every time he looked at her across the room. Then, slowly, hope died and resentment throbbed in its place like an angry scar.

She saw that for years she had automatically accepted Johnny's very real virtues, his honesty, his tact, his kindness, as forming some sort of ultimate standard. He had always treated her with a formal but easy affection: if sometimes she had longed for the tug and thrust of a harder marriage, she had persuaded herself that it was sensation-seeking, a kind of crudeness on her part. Certainly, his goodness seemed so much more apparent than her own that she had eagerly softened her more turbulent emotions and tried to be what she thought he would like, so that now she felt, with

a white blaze of anger, he had turned her into someone who was quite inadequate to deal with any real situation. He had made their relationship an emotionally aseptic affair, his gentle remoteness had not civilized but sterilized her.

* * *

She said to Frederick, 'It's as if we could only touch each other with rubber gloves.'

It was a theatrical remark but he neither smiled nor raised his eyebrows. It struck her that she knew no one so easy to talk to as Frederick though plenty who enjoyed listening, particularly when there was something wrong. But Frederick was not greedy for vicarious excitement, his eyes didn't light up and he never interrupted with contributions of his own. He never talked about himself, Mary thought, and suddenly, remembering the long introspective monologues with which he had bored her when she was living with his mother, she was as startled by the change in him as if she had not seen him since. She looked at him, gravely sucking his empty pipe, his face puckered in an anxious frown that made him seem older and smaller. His thin hair was thinner, his once plump body thin too, almost scarecrowish, and all his clothes had an accidental look as if he had picked them up at a jumble sale when he was thinking of something else. Only the understanding glint on his high forehead was the same; whenever he was particularly, solemnly anxious to be of service, his skin sweated pale, transparent beads, like tears.

He said, 'There's one thing you can be sure of, Mary.' He blushed—he still blushed—and added with angry seriousness, 'Johnny would never do anything dishonourable.'

Another time she might have laughed: there is always something uncomfortably ridiculous, almost to be despised, in friends who are too unguardedly partisan. But now she was simply grateful. She smiled at his pink, indignant face and felt a warm, almost tearful surge of affection, the kind of uprush you feel when you are faced with an old friend and realize how

long your friendship has been and how casually you have relied on it. She thought that in a way that dreadful scene his mother had made, though they never alluded to it, had bound them together for life. They could never be anything less than intimate.

She said, 'I can't believe it. I can trust him in anything. He's never even read a picture postcard that wasn't addressed to him. And yet he goes off every morning and comes back every night and says he's had a good day. Oh, *Fred* . . .'

'Where is he this evening?'

'He said he'd be late. It's some business party.'

Frederick looked down at her with pale, apologetic eyes. 'You want a drink. We'll go out. I haven't anything to offer you here.'

He glanced round his room with a shy air as if he had suddenly caught a glimpse of it, refracted through her eyes. It was a small room on the top floor of a crumbling terrace house in Bayswater, dark and cold in spite of the bellowing gas fire, with silver streaks of damp like slug trails on the wallpaper. The furniture had a lumber room air and the floor was covered with dismal flowered linoleum. Frederick could easily have afforded something better—his mother had died two years before and he had sold her horrible, dark house—and at first Mary had thought that he only continued to live in his garret out of a kind of affectation of low living and high thinking. Lately, however, she had realized that Frederick simply didn't care, he could have lived in a palace and not noticed the difference.

She said, 'It's all right. I don't want anything.'

But he shook his head firmly. 'Of course you must have a drink, Mary,' he said, struggling into his raincoat.

As they went down the stairs, a young man came into the hall through the open front door. He was tall and slender, he wore narrow trousers and a jacket with shimmering threads woven into the material. He stood against the wall as Mary passed him and ducked his head. Frederick stopped and spoke

to him while she waited on the front steps out of earshot. They followed her after a minute. The boy glanced at her, a bland, roguish look and loped off down the road, kicking a stone in the gutter.

'One of my clients,' Frederick explained. 'Not a very promising one.' He laughed. 'He's terribly polite, enormously helpful, but there's nothing to be done for him really. He's the kind that makes me feel like Canute in a shabby raincoat.'

She thought that this was one thing Frederick had not changed in—his nervous habit of mocking at things he really cared about. Once, when Johnny had asked him why he had given up the Church, he had blushed and then said that he had lost his belief in the efficacy of prayer. It had occurred to him that the Royal Family who were prayed for daily in every Church throughout the land, had no longer an expectation of life than anyone else.



They went to a drinking club off Westbourne Grove. It was full of women, dancing with each other and drinking bottled beer at tiny tables. Frederick bought two lagers and they settled at a table near the wall. Mary sipped her pale beer and watched the dancers. She thought of a smart remark about them and bit it back. Frederick had not brought her here to amuse her but because it was the first place they came to. He would have taken her to the Ritz if it had been more convenient.

He looked round him with an abstracted air and filled his pipe with the rather nasty herbal tobacco he affected. Then he said abruptly, 'What are you afraid of?'

The question shocked her. Until he asked it, she had not known she was afraid. She had been angry, indignant, bewildered. Now, suddenly and inexplicably, she felt fear, like someone lying half awake in a warm bed and watching the door open slowly.

'I don't know,' Fred.'

'You must have had something in mind. Otherwise you would simply have asked him, wouldn't you?' He smiled with the gentlest possible malice. 'You're usually uncomfortably direct.'

'Not with Johnny.' She fumbled in her bag for cigarettes. 'I was ashamed to ask.'

'I see that. But why?'

'I suppose there are lots of reasons. One of them—oh, it's too ridiculous.'

'Tell me,' he said.

She lit her cigarette. 'All right. When I was a child, there was a man who lived next door. He was a clerk or something—he always wore pin-striped trousers and paper collars. He had something wrong with his neck, he always held his head on one side and it used to shake a little. His wife was always cleaning windows and shaking mats out of the back door. There was a boy they were going to send to the grammar school, they wouldn't let him play in the street. They were terribly respectable. Then he lost his job, one summer, before the war. He wasn't out of work for long, a couple of months at the most, but all the time he went on going off every day, wearing his striped trousers, a clean collar, catching the same train. Of course everyone knew. My mother used to talk it over with her friends—though they were awfully kind, really. They never let him know they knew.'

She ground out her half-smoked cigarette. 'I used to wonder what he did all day. Sat in the park—or fed the pigeons in Trafalgar Square. . . .' Her voice faltered, for a moment she saw Johnny among the lonely people in the park, waiting on a bench with his briefcase beside him, waiting for the hands to crawl round his expensive watch. But the image was ludicrously sentimental. Johnny had nothing in common with that sad clerk. She said, 'But it's nonsense, of course. Johnny's not *respectable*.'

She started to smile, but something in Frederick's face stopped her. 'For Heaven's sake,' she said. 'Don't *you* think so?'

His mouth was set and unhappy. 'He could do something like that. To—save you worry.'

The bald admission was terrible. She said miserably, 'Am I so useless?'

He reached out compassionately for her hand. Hurt, she jerked it away and saw that a tall woman with grey, cropped hair who was wearing a man's sports jacket and brown cords, was watching them with sly interest as if they were freaks at a fair.

Frederick said gently, 'I think you need security more than most women.' He frowned as if afraid this sounded like a condemnation and added quickly, 'Though all women need it. Particularly if they have children.'

'Is that unreasonable? We didn't all have rich grandfathers.'

There was nothing accusing in Frederick's silence. She accused herself. 'I was upset when he left the advertising job. Oh—I know it was different from anything he'd done before. And it was a bad time because he was so upset about failing his flying medical. But he didn't give it a chance. He was so contemptuous. He said it wasn't the way he wanted to live—that he wanted to do something better than sell soap.' She stared at her glass. 'I told him he was being irresponsible.'

'There's nothing irresponsible, surely, in wanting to do a decent job?'

'No, I suppose not.' She felt confused, on obscure ground. She seized thankfully on something concrete. 'He's not qualified for anything. He never went to a university. He just expects something worthwhile to fall into his lap—as a kind of right. It's such a *privileged* view.'

'But not necessarily a bad one. Scrabbling after food and rent isn't the most important thing, after all. I mean—once survival at that level isn't in question any more, civilized people have to change their values, don't they?'

He looked at her earnestly and she smiled a little. Frederick was never deterred by clichés because he didn't know they were clichés: he worked out everything for himself, from first

principles, and saw each stale old truth with a fresh and eager eye. He was simple and good, he always saw the best in people, probably because his mother had always seen the worst. Frederick's was the better attitude, Mary thought, but neither was objective. And although he had made a great deal seem easier, she was aware, still, of an area in her mind where a dark uneasiness lay. She said, 'I know I haven't been much help.' She lifted her chin, acknowledged her guilt and determined to put things right. 'What can I do, Fred?'

He laughed. 'How like you that is.' He gave her a sudden look of hope. 'You're sure you can't just ask him?'

'No.' She had the feeling that there was some reason they had not touched on and that she did not want to touch on and that Frederick knew it too. His smile vanished, he gave her a worried glance.

'You could find out where he goes, what he's doing.' He hesitated. 'You could follow him.'

'Is that a joke?'

'No.' He knocked out his pipe, unscrewed the bowl and began to scrape it out with an implement on his penknife. 'It could be important. He might even be ill.'

'Do you think that's likely?'

'Well—no. Of course, the most surprising people break down. But you can't help unless you know what's going on, can you?'

She burst out helplessly, trembling on the edge of both laughter and anger, 'But how could I do that? It's bad enough—sitting here and talking about him. But to trail him—as if he were an erring husband on an adulterous spree . . . *He* would never do anything so mean, so underhand. . . .'

'It's yourself you'd be hurting, not him,' Frederick said bracingly. 'Sometimes people have to do things that aren't very pretty.'

She gasped, weakly hysterical, 'But I wouldn't know how. I'm not a boy scout or a detective.'

'It's not so difficult.' He smiled quite serenely, like a

driving instructor comforting a nervous pupil. 'It's easy enough to keep out of sight in London. And if he did see you, he'd never guess.'

He looked uncomfortable and suddenly she tumbled off her uneasy perch onto the side of anger. 'You mean it wouldn't enter his head that I could play a dirty trick like that?' She stood up. 'I should never have talked to you.'

'Mary,' he said, startled, and held out his hand.

She ignored it. 'It's monstrous, you have no right . . .' Her voice rose, a few heads, some ambiguously shorn, turned in her direction. She saw that although it was satisfying to get angry with Frederick it solved nothing, and this made her angrier still. 'I thought you were his friend,' she muttered, almost in tears, and blundered out from behind the table. She walked straight out, through the crowded room and up the bare, shabby stairs.

* * *

He was waiting outside the door of her house. It was raining when she came out of the tube station and she was soaked and shivering. He handed her her folded mackintosh.

'You left this,' he said mildly. 'I ran after you but it was too late. I had to get a taxi across the park.' He felt the sleeve of her suit. 'You're soaking wet.' His tone reproved her gently for her carelessness and for the extravagance of the taxi. He never travelled in anything but public transport.

She took her raincoat and fumbled for her key, preserving a punishing silence.

'I'm sorry, Mary,' he said. He looked ghostly under the purple street lighting and his eyes were anxious.

She said, 'Look—forget everything I said, will you? I was in a state. I'm ashamed to have troubled you.'

He winced as though she had bruised him. 'You shouldn't be,' he said.

They went into the entrance hall, she opened the flat door and they heard the gramophone playing.

Frederick said, 'Is that the baby-sitter?'

'No. The woman in the ground-floor flat keeps an eye on Martin when we go out. We don't encourage her to sit there because she drinks all the gin. Johnny must have come home early.'

'Oh.' He hovered uncertainly at the top of the basement stairs. For a moment they glanced at each other guiltily, like startled lovers. As they went down the stairs, Mary said in an unnecessarily loud voice, 'Come in for a drink, won't you?'

Johnny got up as they went into the drawing-room. 'Fred,' he said, with unaffected, smiling delight and to Mary, 'I wondered where you were.' He did not speak accusingly but as if he had been, simply, lonely, sitting in the brightly lit room, an empty glass in his hand, waiting for her to come home. For a moment she felt the prick of guilty sadness you feel for someone else's disappointment and then she saw that he had not, in fact, been alone. The lavatory cistern flushed and a man came through the door that led to the bathroom, a short, lively-looking man with a knobbly irregular face, dark bright eyes, dark tufts of hair on his cheekbones, a blue chin. She recognized him with a rush of pleasure that surprised her and momentarily eclipsed every other emotion. 'Why it's *you*,' she said.

Charles came up to her, amused and a little stirred by her warm, startled smile. He had remembered her simply as a pretty, quite attractive girl who was Johnny's wife and therefore of no interest, in any other context, to a casual male. Now, her entrance with another man and her bright, unguarded welcome—as if they had been old friends alone in the room—woke a sudden thrust of excitement in him. Wet with rain, her hair sleeked damply back from her pale, rather high forehead, she looked nearly beautiful to him; perhaps, he thought wryly, because her bedraggled appearance made her seem more accessible. He had always been nervous of women who looked too tidy, too self-assured, and not only because he had

found them cold in bed. They disturbed some deep spring of conceit in him; he needed to dominate in sexual relationships. He took her hand. 'How are you? And your son, who is *not* like your husband?' He was pleased, both by her quick laugh and the look of shyness that followed it, as if the intimacy in the clumsy little joke had embarrassed her a little.

'We're both terribly well,' she said, and turned to Frederick, standing just inside the door and twirling his shabby hat in his hand. She introduced him, Johnny offered drinks. His eyes had a fixed, bright look as if he had been drinking a lot. Frederick said yes, he would love one. His acceptance was a measure of his discomfort, he didn't drink spirits normally. He took the glass and sat on the sofa, sipping his drink like medicine.

Johnny touched Mary's sleeve. 'You're wet through.' She nodded, slipped off her jacket and threw it onto a chair, not looking at him. She said, 'I didn't expect you back so early,' caught Charles's speculative look and coloured slightly. 'Wasn't the party fun?'

'It was just a business do.'

She looked at him then and said, quite sharply Charles thought, 'What sort of thing?'

'A shipping firm. Party for a retiring President, something like that. Julian took me along. There was someone he wanted me to meet. As a matter of fact, I ran into Charles. We decided to cut it short and come home.'

'I went to see Frederick. I'm sorry I wasn't here.'

Her nervously formal apology included Charles. He settled himself comfortably in a chair, lit a small Dutch cigar and said, 'It was a terrible party. Everyone talked about their golf averages.' He looked, in spite of his dark, English suit, so very European and intense that Mary thought it was difficult to imagine that he would know what a golf average was. He went on, 'It was the sort of party one is always enormously surprised to find oneself at. Beluga and gin and tax evasion.'

Johnny said, 'Lord Addlestone brought you, didn't he?'

'Yes. I think it was a reward for a good boy. I did a long, dull memorandum for him last month. I don't suppose he ever read it.'

'I didn't know you went in for that sort of thing,' Johnny said. 'Advising industrial firms and so on. If you're interested, I might be able to put you in touch with one or two people.'

Charles shook his head. 'No—I like jam on my bread but not at that price. I only did it to please my uncle—he's a business associate of Addlestone's. It was entirely mechanical and *very* boring.' He smiled broadly, showing two gold teeth. It was a very gentle rebuff and Mary was suddenly ashamed that Johnny had provoked it. He had meant well, but it was ridiculous of him to talk as if he had fat livings in his gift. She got the feeling that for some reason he felt himself superior to Charles: she remembered that when they had been at Fitchet, Johnny had been extra polite to him, the way most people, most nice people that is, are polite to those who are not quite their equals.

Frederick said, 'Are you Charles Benjamin Franks?' He looked interested, slightly awed.

'Well, yes. At least, I suppose so.'

'I read an article of yours that interested me very much,' Frederick said and went on to ask a number of questions that Charles answered perfectly politely but briefly, as if Frederick's earnest-student manner discomfited him.

While they talked, Johnny got up and stood by the fire, playing with a Dresden figure on the mantelshelf. Finally he said abruptly, 'What does success feel like, Charles?'

The question had a curious flavour. Charles frowned, considering what it was. 'I don't know. Success is just a word, isn't it?'

Frederick said, 'So is failure.' He smiled with uneasy brightness. 'If you go into the back streets of Streatham, you'll find no one has ever heard of either.'

'Maybe.' Johnny blew a speck of dust off the china shepherd and replaced it carefully beside the clock. 'It's not something

I ever thought of until the other day.' He looked at Charles. 'I had lunch with Climper. D'you remember him? He was at the re-union party.'

'Yes.'

'He wanted to sell me a policy.' Johnny went on, slowly, thoughtfully, but with a rumbling undertone of anger. 'He was one of the best squadron leaders we ever had. D'you know what he's doing now? Peddling insurance from door to door like a *hawker*.' He poured himself another drink without offering one to anyone else: Charles realized with a shock that this discourtesy was extraordinary. Johnny went on, his eyes shining with outrage, 'Poor old Climper. That's what I thought when I left him. And *then* I thought—I was walking down the street and it was like being kicked in the stomach—does *he* say, Poor old Prothero?' He stared round the room.

Frederick shifted uneasily on the sofa, and got out his pipe. Charles glanced at Mary and saw her double her fists in her lap.

'It's an uncomfortable business—to see yourself mirrored in other men,' Johnny said. He drank his whisky in two quick gulps and paced restlessly up and down the room. The others looked carefully at the walls, the ceiling, the floor—anywhere but at him.

'You know when you've climbed a mountain,' he burst out. 'You get to the top and you're aching all over and your lungs are bursting, but it's a *fine* feeling. Nothing else like it in the world. You've been stretched to the limit—*used* everything, your brain, your body—that's how one wants to feel. And how often does it happen?' He stumbled on the edge of the carpet and regained his balance with difficulty. 'It's this ghastly feeling that so much goes to waste . . . so much talent, so much courage. . . .'

Frederick cleared his throat loudly, scarlet with anxiety but clearly prepared to argue, Charles saw, as if Johnny were in a state to be argued with. 'Courage is never wasted,' he moralized sedately. 'You need more, really, in private life

than you need climbing a mountain.' His pulpit tone was absurdly funny but no one laughed.

'Life is one long process of waste,' Johnny said. 'You should know that, in your job.'

He stood in the centre of the room, swaying slightly but looking very handsome with his fair hair untidy and the faint, ruddy tingeing on his cheekbones that always came when he was excited. Looking at him, Mary felt suddenly that there was some kind of force or strength in him that was not so much wasted but, as he clearly felt himself, unused. For the first time she was sorry for him with that dreadful, aching pity that excludes love and under the pity there was fear, not defined, but lurking like a shadow in the corner.

8

MARY woke up with a feeling of freedom, almost light-heartedness. After the others had left the night before, the situation had seemed unresolvable. She had lain awake for hours, panic swelling monstrously in the dark, listening to the rain and Johnny's regular breathing beside her. But the simplicity of Frederick's suggestion must have worked on her unconscious while she slept. She woke and knew, as if she had planned it herself, that she was going to do what he had said.

Confusion returned, briefly, at breakfast. Martin had been kissed and sent to school and they sat, drinking a last cup of coffee and smoking cigarettes. Everything seemed bright and almost aggressively normal as in a photograph of well-fed people in a magazine advertisement for easy living. For a moment she almost persuaded herself that there was nothing wrong at all. In a moment, Johnny would get up, yawn, pick

up his briefcase and umbrella and kiss her good-bye like any other husband.

It was exactly what he did do. The yawn. The kiss. 'I'm sorry about last night,' he said. 'I must have been a damn bore.'

'You shouldn't drink on an empty stomach.'

'I don't know what came over me. D'you know, I don't think I've ever been drunk before?'

She said, 'There has to be a first time for everything.'

He grinned. 'I suppose so.' He picked up his briefcase, his umbrella. 'Good-bye, love,' he said.

* * *

She waited until she heard the door close. Then she put on her raincoat and went after him. It was raining, a cold, fine mizzle. Johnny walked erect under the old-fashioned black umbrella that he had inherited from his grandfather, straight to the tube station. He folded the umbrella, put some coins in a ticket machine and went through the barrier. He was a long way ahead of her, going down the escalator and she was afraid of losing him and then afraid that he would turn and see her. The platform was crowded. She stood by a weighing machine, out of sight in case he should look round but he stood upright and still, his briefcase clasped in front of him, staring at a Whitbread advertisement on the other side of the tunnel. The train rattled in and she chose the carriage behind him, standing where she could see him through two panels of glass, strap-hanging and reading the headlines of his folded newspaper. There was an empty seat beside him, he glanced round and motioned a man standing next to him to sit there. He was an oldish man, with a nervous, submissive face and bowed shoulders; as he sat down he looked startled, as if no one had ever offered him a seat on a train before.

Johnny got out at Aldgate. The rain had stopped, the gutters streamed, there was a bleak, high sun. The pavements were crowded with men in caps and slip-shod women in

steel curlers and bedroom slippers, middle-aged at thirty, gossiping outside the shops. There were some pretty girls, very young and cheaply smart in thin coats and high-heeled patent shoes with ankle straps. One girl, with dark, made-up eyes like a Disney fawn, looked at Johnny. She nudged her companion and they both stopped and stared after him. For a second, Mary saw him as they did, as something fixed and godlike, striding purposefully through the aimless, anonymous crowds, his head high and hopeful.

He turned off the main road and she followed him along a narrow street with tall, blind warehouses on either side. She was more nervous here, there was no cover, but he didn't look back. He marched briskly, as if to military music, and wheeled round a corner. Now the street was empty, she started to run. If she lost him, she would never find the courage to do this again and the fact that she had done it once would darken the deception between them. She had no idea what she would do when she finally tracked him down but she ran after him with a sense of purpose, almost of exaltation.

She reached the corner and saw him, half-way down a wider and busier street with shops and a small, open market at the end. Then he vanished. She hurried after him, marking the place where he had disappeared by a small green van parked outside. It was a tailor's shop with a pressing machine in the window. Peering in, she saw rails of half-finished suits with tacking marks on the shoulders and, moving slowly in the steamy gloom, a fat man in shirtsleeves. There was an open door at the side which did not lead to the shop but to a narrow flight of dusty, linoleum-covered stairs. At the side of the door was a brass plate with bells and several cards jammed roughly into slots. Two of them were illegible, one was a window-cleaning firm and the fourth said Abba Ltd. Exports. There was an air of shabbiness and failure about the uncleaned brass and the dirty white cards.

Opposite the building there was a small café with the day's

menus chalked on a blackboard outside, and a ragged piece of net curtaining tacked to the lower half of the window. Egg and chips, bacon and chips, sausages and chips. She tried to see Johnny, sitting at one of the tables inside, eating greasy chips and drinking cups of brown, stewed tea. Suddenly her presence in the street seemed unutterably sordid. She was horrified by what she had done, she no longer wanted to know anything, she wanted to forget what she had found out already. She ran, in a black vacuum of panic, away from the tailor's shop, along the narrow street, past the high, warehouse walls. The breath caught in her throat, she ran as if there was something dark and terrible behind her. She stumbled into the main street and collided with Julian, blundering into the broad, firm expanse of his waistcoat. His hands caught her shoulders and held her.

* * *

He was not alone. 'Mary,' he said, 'this is Theodore Kranz. Mr. Kranz, Mrs. Prothero.'

Though Mr. Kranz was short and plump, he had a martial air. He shook hands with Mary, but spiritually he clicked his heels. His smile displayed beautiful teeth.

'It is particularly nice to meet you,' he said. 'Though so unexpected.' His smile broadened unbelievably, exposing unstained black molars. His eye teeth were very white and carnivorous. After a moment, Mary tore her gaze away from them and discovered his face, pleasant and rather stupid. He had large, pale eyes like a kind of boiled sweet and there was a blue scar down the side of his face. He said, 'I have been looking forward to meeting Mr. Prothero's wife.'

'Do you know Johnny?' she said idiotically.

'I had the pleasure of meeting him last night,' he said. 'Mr. Cloutsham was kind enough to introduce me. We only talked for a short while but I found him a very fine man. The kind of man we need in business.' He flashed the machinery of his mouth at Mary with an absurd, but kind intensity. 'I

hope to have the pleasure of meeting him again, quite soon.'

Julian was watching her face. He said quickly, 'Kranz—do you mind? I'd like a word with Mrs. Prothero.'

'Of course.' He bowed his head slightly and looked stiff.

'We'll lunch together,' Julian said. His ingratiating tone surprised Mary. Mr. Kranz did not look particularly important. 'One o'clock? I'll come to your office.'

'I shall be delighted. That will give me time to see what I can arrange for your customer in Pakistan.' The boiled eyes twinkled as if something in this remark amused him. He raised his hand at Mary in a sort of benediction and the two men moved away a little. Julian said something in an undertone and Kranz laughed shortly. Then he walked off, jaunty and bald-headed, moving with short, decisive steps like a dancer.

Julian said, 'Queer little fish, isn't he? Fascinating history. He's a Pole—escaped from Siberia and went into the Polish Navy. The Germans caught him but he got away and landed up in wireless intelligence or something.' He spoke with hearty cheerfulness but his expression was vaguely uneasy. She thought he was talking for the sake of something to say.

'What does he do now?'

'He's a shipsbroker. Useful chap to know in other ways, too. He worked for an export firm in Warsaw before the war.'

'Oh.'

His thick eyelids drooped at her. 'I've been wanting to talk to you, Mary.' He spoke with abrupt authority, gripped her arm and marched her firmly into a Lyons'. 'Sit down,' he said. 'I'll get you a cup of coffee in a minute.'

'I don't want a cup of coffee.' She was shaking with rage. 'Johnny's working with you, isn't he?'

'You know he isn't. Not yet, anyway. But that's not exactly what I wanted to talk about.'

'Why not? Isn't it important? If he's in some sort of dreary little mess . . .'

'He's not in any sort of mess. And if he was, you're not his

wet nurse.' She opened her mouth to protest but he held up his thick white hand in a magisterial gesture like a traffic policeman. 'Look, sweetie—I'm fond of old Johnny. Give me credit for that, will you? I've known him a long time. And I don't like what's been happening to him.' His tone was sentimental and histrionic but it compelled her attention. It was just possible that he was sincere.

'What do you mean?'

He leaned forward and covered her hand with his own. He was always touching her—he usually kissed her when they met—but never as if he were making a pass at her. She was reminded of the way cats will always jump on the laps of people who dislike them. He said, 'I mean—he's got the ball at his feet. Just give him a chance to kick it, there's a good girl.'

She saw that he had no idea how completely she had been kept in the dark. She said belligerently, 'I hate riddles.'

'All right. He took that job with dear Uncle Lester because you wanted him to, didn't he? And what did it lead to? He didn't even make a decent living out of it, did he? And he's got a natural taste for the lordly life. Does he still order his writing paper from Harrods?'

'We live well enough,' she said coldly.

'Up to a point, Lord Copper.' He grinned. 'But you can't live on a salary nowadays—you haven't done, have you?' He paused. 'Let me tell you something, Mary. It's not nice to be genteel poor. I know.'

His voice had changed, he was no longer smiling. She saw an intimate revelation trembling on his lips and felt a shamed hostility.

'My mamma had money. The trouble was, she was a bitch. She decamped with a Greek when I was four. My father was a country doctor near Aberystwyth but at that time country doctors didn't make much, he was keeping his old dad in a nursing home and he was a sick man himself. Life was one long procession of bills—mostly for the fearful middle-class

business of keeping up a front. I went to a dreary little private school. It was run by a man who'd sat in mustard gas in the first war and had a tin bottom and a filthy temper, probably because half the bills were never paid.'

'I've read about that sort of school.'

'I bet you have.' His eyes regarded her coldly. 'You're a bright girl, Mary. All right—you know it all. You read it in a book. But here's one thing you didn't read. Boys didn't often get scholarships from that school—they didn't often pass into a reputable one. But I got a scholarship. And when my father heard, do you know what he did? He cried. Blubbered like a snivelling brat in short trousers. And when he'd finished crying, he made me kneel down with him in his horrible little consulting-room and give thanks to God. His son was going to be a gentleman. As if *I* cared a tuppenny damn. All I wanted was a bit of money in my pocket and a decent bicycle—I didn't want to mix with the right people and learn to speak with a hot potato in my mouth though I *did* learn to do that fast enough. But I couldn't see the point. My poor old Dad was a gent—he had an accent so plummy most of his patients couldn't understand him and could quote Greek till the cows came home, but it didn't pay the bills. It wouldn't pay my bills either—I found that out as soon as I'd got to this marvellous school and seen all the other boys with their parents rolling up in Bentleys and their holidays in Switzerland and all the nice presents tumbling off the Christmas tree. I hated them all.' He stopped and looked very slightly abashed. 'I'm sorry if I've bored you. I suppose you're waiting for the commercial. It's just that you need an awful lot of lolly to live like a gentleman.'

She believed him but she felt that his telling her all this was a kind of bribe, a trick, to persuade her to like him. 'Maybe. But why should you care about Johnny?'

'Friendship, sweetie, what else?' His mouth smiled but his eyes were cold as the winter sea. 'As I said, I'm fond of him. I want him to have a chance. And not just money-wise.' His

voice deepened suddenly, he spoke with a tight, controlled anger. 'I don't want to see him endlessly subservient to some diseased little man like Simpson who enjoys humiliating him. He's got to strike out on his own—make a success. If he doesn't, he'll get bitter, he'll turn into one of those failed ex-officers who prop up hotel bars and talk about the wogs and throw their money about.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' she said, but she felt an icy nudge of fear. 'What can he do?' she said helplessly. 'He doesn't know anything about business.'

'You mean you don't. Maybe he doesn't either, but he'll learn. He's got the right kind of background. People like him, trust him, you know. He's an excellent front man.'

'You mean he'll be useful to *you*,' she said flatly. He shrugged his shoulders. She went on, 'I just don't see him as a gentleman adventurer, that's all.'

He laughed, not very pleasantly. 'You don't see him as anything except a nice professional man with a nice, professional label, do you? You'd like to be able to say, "my husband is an accountant, or a solicitor, or a doctor . . ." when you're gossiping with Mrs. Snooks over the garden fence. You want a nice, suburban husband bringing home the dubs, mowing the lawn on Sunday, bathing the kids—if he gets a rise, there'll be a bit more warmth in the Saturday sex as a result.' His mouth set in a distasteful sneer. 'You're like every other woman. You've got a religious respect for the monthly salary, the pension scheme.'

Tears welled up in her eyes, she felt stupid and gauche and ignorant. She said stubbornly, 'How do you know that isn't what *he* wants? He had a monthly salary in the Air Force, didn't he?'

'He was flying then.'

'Yes.' She admitted unhappily that she had tried to forget how much that had meant to Johnny and was ashamed because it was Julian who had reminded her. She looked at him uneasily, trying to crush down her instinctive dislike, wondering

if it was fair to doubt his affection for Johnny. What frightened her about Julian, she decided, was a kind of vast carelessness. He might, for the moment, be genuinely, deeply concerned about Johnny, but it was a spasmodic concern. He was the sort of man who could involve himself with energy and passion in the life of a friend but only for a brief period: afterwards, whether he had helped them or smashed them up, he would forget them equally easily. But he was clearly concerned now—moved, almost. His eyes were bright, sentimentally intent.

‘I wish you’d trust me, Mary. I do understand Johnny, you know.’ Then he widened his eyes comically as if afraid to be too serious. ‘Oh—he’s a much nicer person than me. I grant you that. He nothing sordid did, or mean, upon that memorable scene. Unquote. Etcetera. I’m not sneering—really—that attracts me, the way a virgin attracts a dirty old man.’ He smiled with disarming pleasure at his own joke and then looked solemn, like a man switching funny masks at a party. ‘But that doesn’t mean I don’t know how he ticks. We’re alike in all sorts of ways. We neither of us take kindly to authority. We like to control our own lives. We’re both—romantics, you might say.’

She said, ‘You’ve got about as much in common as Don Quixote and Al Capone.’

‘I doubt if either of us is of so large a stature.’ His eyes gleamed. ‘Let him have this chance, Mary. It is up to you. He won’t do anything you don’t approve of.’

Hysteria bubbled up inside her. She felt she couldn’t go on any longer, sparring in the dark. She had a terrible, driving desire to tell him the truth, that she didn’t know what he was talking about, that Johnny had told her nothing. She controlled herself with an effort, partly out of pride, and partly because she knew how he would respond. He would be kind, sympathetic—but his sympathy was a debased currency. He would enjoy the situation too much, lap it up with a kind of eager, womanish greed.

He said solicitously, 'Is anything the matter?'

She shook her head and he patted her hand. 'All right, you needn't tell me. You're very loyal, Mary.'

He spoke with jocular condescension like someone presenting a dunce with the booby prize.

9

JOHNNY said, 'So you followed me on purpose. To spy on me.'

His face was pale and outraged, he flung the evening paper down on the table and it lay like a gauntlet between them.

She said, 'I had to. I couldn't bear it. I knew you weren't working for Lester.'

A muscle twitched in his cheek. 'When did you find that out?'

'Last week. The day Martin cut his cheek. I rang the office.'

He expelled his breath in a long sigh. 'I wondered about that. But I was so sure that if you *had* found out, you'd have told me.'

'I'm sorry. But you pushed me into it, didn't you?' He raised his eyebrows and she went on desolately, 'I see now—it was an awful thing to do.'

'I'm glad you realize that.'

'Though why should it be?' she said, goaded. 'After all—you lied to me.'

'Believe me, I'm deeply ashamed of that. Haven't I apologized enough? Do you want me to *grovel*?'

He rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes like someone waking from a bad dream. 'Oh—damn it all. I *am* sorry. It was despicable. I thought you'd worry so much if I told you. I hate to see you worried.'

'Oh.'

They looked at each other across chaos. She saw a flash of fear tighten his mouth, then it was gone and she had no idea what he was thinking. She said, 'You're working with Julian, aren't you? Why couldn't you have told me that?'

'I tried to, once or twice. But it never seemed the right moment.' She recognized with a dull sense of failure that he had been afraid to tell her. He lifted his head challengingly, his voice was suddenly stern and unmodulated. 'I know I was wrong. There's no excuse. Except the poor one—that it was all so terribly vague and you'd have condemned it out of hand. You've never liked Julian. He's not conventional enough for you.'

The sneer was unlike him. Only a strong emotion could have provoked it. She saw, helplessly, that she was up against something stronger than the ordinary loyalty Johnny would always feel for his friends. He had an indiscriminating respect for experiences not his own—a delicacy that made him very easy to cheat. It was probably one of the reasons he stuck up for Julian, admiring him for qualities of grit and gutter brightness that he had never needed and so set, perhaps, too high a rating on.

She said dully, 'Is it such an awful thing, to be conventional? If I liked Julian, I'd never trust him. Can't you find something better to do than getting mixed up with his sort?'

'No, by God I can't,' he said violently, and her heart jumped. She had the feeling it was about the most intimate thing he had ever said to her. She felt as if she had just ripped a piece of plaster off an open wound.

'Surely that's nonsense, isn't it?' she pleaded. 'Perhaps it wasn't a good thing to work for Lester. I'm sorry if I overpersuaded you. But you could get another job.'

'Doing what? Writing rhyming jingles to persuade fools to drug themselves with aspirin? Wangling expense accounts? My dearest girl—I want to run my own life.'

'Will you be running your own life with Julian, or just

making his easier?' She did not like the way she was behaving but something forced her on. 'He told me you'd make a good front man.'

His eyes narrowed into golden slits. 'We're going into partnership.'

'Does that mean he wants money?'

He looked disconcerted for a moment. 'I may have to get some money together.' This was a phrase he often used and that had always annoyed her. It implied that money was not something you worked for.

'Do you mean you're going to ask Christine?'

He went to the cupboard and got out the gin and two glasses.

She said, 'Johnny, you can't. When she was here the other day, she told me she wanted to put some money into a trust for Martin's education. I think it was meant as a hint that it was all we were to expect from her.' She had the unhappy feeling that she was abusing a confidence. He said nothing, pouring out the drinks with a studied concentration. She said, 'It's not fair. Because she can't refuse you. Or won't refuse you.'

He said with controlled patience, 'Look, love, I'm not going to bully Mother, if that's what you're afraid of. I'm simply going to suggest a sound, water-tight investment. It *is* that. I've taken legal advice—I asked Charles, as a matter of fact. It's an import and export business that went bankrupt last year with a tax loss of some forty thousand pounds. Julian's bought a controlling interest and is building it up—he's got plenty of contracts. It's the sort of business that's bound to expand—for example, the Government lifted restrictions on the export of strategic materials at the beginning of the year. Of course, we'll be dealing with small stuff to start with, but it'll be much more productive than a trust fund.' He drained his glass and smiled at her. 'Why did she suggest that, anyway? Does she think I'm incapable of educating my own son?'

He spoke with amused indignation and, for a moment, the

idea did seem ridiculous. His face had a buoyant, boyish look. All the old cant phrases rolled through her mind in conventional procession. He had only to 'find his feet', 'grasp the nettle', 'seize the moment'. She had a beautiful, tingling hope that this was true. She thought, ashamed, that it was as easy to undervalue people you loved as to over-rate them.

She said, 'I suppose she does think that,' and smiled to reassure him.

He said nothing for a moment and then turned brusquely away from her. He said, in a low voice, 'Oh God, let me keep my temper.'

She was half prepared to laugh but when he looked at her, she was frightened. He was very white, trembling with a held-in anger, lines etched his mouth and seemed to make his nose thinner so that it stood out like a beak. He had once said, during one of their early rows, that he was afraid to lose his temper in case he became violent. At the time she had thought this was a kind of boast, a dramatic overstatement out of a hallucinatory world of strong, silent heroes where he figured, sternly upright and splendid. Now, looking at him, she realized that he would never say a thing like that for effect and that in the back of her mind she had always known it and that it had frightened her. The reason she had not confronted him with the truth before was not shame or delicacy but a deep, unadmitted fear. His gentle restraint was deliberate, tight-wound, the gentleness of a man who knows how terrible the alternative can be.

She said, 'Johnny . . .' and then fear was drowned in a wave of engulfing pity. He was hurt in his pride in a way she could never be, for to him pride was important, an invincible belief in his own dignity. Where most people would have shrugged their shoulders wryly at the suggestion that they could not afford to educate their sons, he was humiliated almost beyond bearing. He had been promised so much, he was wide open to disappointment on every side. 'Oh damn everything,' he said in a choking voice and went from the room.

She caught him up at the top of the stairs. He had his raincoat over his arm. 'Johnny—for Heaven's sake.' She felt pity for him still but there was exasperation lying like a brick at the heart of it.

'Don't come after me,' he said. 'I'm no good to you or to anyone.'

'Don't be a fool,' she said and felt suddenly excited. It seemed that there was a taut knot of tension inside her and that to quarrel with him would release it. 'If you knew how ludicrous you looked—standing there with that glowering, righteous stare. And over something so small, so petty . . .' She caught his arm but he shook it off as if it were dirty. 'What's wrong in your mother wanting to pay for Martin's school? There's no ignominy in not being rich enough to do it, surely? And we aren't poor in any real sense, after all.'

'You don't understand,' he said haughtily, with a closed look on his face that made her want to hit him with all her strength. But it was the truth. She didn't understand him, she couldn't reach him.

'All right,' she said. 'I don't understand. I don't understand, either, why you should be so dead keen to turn Martin into a facsimile of yourself. Why turn him into a cocky public-school boy who's going to expect the red carpet to be nicely laid out for him? Hasn't it done you enough harm? Do you have to stamp *him*, set him apart? . . .' She heard her voice rising shrilly and tried, self-consciously, to introduce a lighter note, ' . . . give him ideas above his station? I don't want to turn *my* son into a disillusioned gentleman with one foot in a club in St. James's and the other in the gutter.'

'Shut up.' His face was a pale, stiff mask in the half gloom of the stairs. 'You should see what you look like when you yell at me like a fishwife. Your face slips out of focus like a drunk's.'

She gasped. 'Oh . . . oh . . . I would rather you *hit* me . . .'

She flew at him, he caught her wrists and held them.

'I didn't mean to hurt you,' he said. He looked shocked,

and she saw this was true. He hadn't meant to hurt her, he had simply been ashamed, because she had so little control. 'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that,' he said in an appalled voice.

'That's all right.' She leaned limply against the wall, anger had left her quite suddenly and she felt a sense of release that was almost sexual. It was the way quarrels often affected her. When they were over she felt peaceful, luxuriously sad.

* * *

Johnny went out. While he was away, she bathed and changed, smoothing her body with powder and brushing her hair for a long time until it flew crackling round her face when she combed it. After a little she felt renewed, full of fight. Her thoughts were clear and happy, they flew like arrows, like the electricity in her hair. She wanted to do something with the energy that had suddenly accumulated inside her. She was not helpless: there must be some adequate arguments to back up her distrust of Julian. Johnny could do nothing without Christine's money and Christine would certainly insist that Lester should be consulted first.

Mary decided that she would insist on it too. The thought of Lester comforted her like an easy chair. Instantly, she dismissed her dislike of him, his dislike of Johnny. She had no idea on what terms Johnny had parted from his uncle but the family solidarity was too strong for there to be any definite break. Lester's sense of duty would compel him to shield his nephew from a dicey business venture. She moved about the flat, her lips moving, making little gestures with her hands as she prepared her arguments and then, on an impulse, she telephoned Charles Franks.

He sounded surprised, then cautious. Yes, Johnny had talked to him about the export firm. They had only discussed it in the most general terms. He wasn't really qualified to give an opinion and he had recommended a good solicitor to go into the legal side of it. He spoke with a slightly over-elaborate

disinterestedness that seemed to arise from something more than the ordinary dislike of a professional man for giving off-the-cuff advice to his friends. She wondered how he felt about Julian and did not quite like to ask him. Their conversation tailed off with an obvious bewilderment on Charles's side and a sense of ineptitude on hers: she realized that she had not properly worked out in her own mind what she had hoped to learn from him.

Then he said, after an interval, 'It would be nice if you would lunch with me one day.'

He spoke in a stiff, almost stilted way, sounding unexpectedly nervous. He had a slow, exact way of talking that made him seem more foreign over the telephone than when they had met face to face. The invitation surprised and then stimulated her.

She said, 'That's awfully kind. Yes, I'd love to.'

He said, 'When? You couldn't manage tomorrow?'

She looked at her diary. The page was blank. 'No. Not tomorrow.' She went on with unusual provocativeness. 'Not this week at all, I'm afraid.'

The disappointment in his 'Oh', flattered her.

'I could manage almost any day next week. Not Monday.'

'Tuesday, then?'

'That would be lovely.'

His voice became briskly competent. 'What about The Gay Cavalier. Greek Street. One o'clock?'

'Yes.'

'Until Tuesday, then.'

'Until Tuesday. . . .'

She put the receiver down with a vague, pleasant feeling of guilt as if at some childish naughtiness.

* * *

When Johnny came back, she was still in an energetic, happy mood. They sat over beer and cheese in the kitchen and talked quite calmly. She found herself thinking that to anyone

peering through the modern plate-glass window—three times as large as the original one to trap as much light as possible in the basement—they must look a very happy couple, talking over the day together. She felt she was acting on a lighted stage. She pushed back her dark hair, tilted her head on one side and smiled over-steadily. Johnny watched her with a troubled look.

He had promised not to decide anything definitely, indeed, it was impossible to do so, until he had talked to his mother. He agreed, with a shade more stiffness, that it would be sensible to ask Lester's advice.

'Though I don't like it. I hate it, in fact. It looks as if I'm incapable of making up my own mind. But if it will make you happier . . .

'It won't. I just think it's wise. Lester knows more about this sort of thing than you do.'

He sighed deeply and she felt guiltily responsible. She got up and went round to his side of the table and stroked his hair, leaning against him and pressing her breasts against his shoulder. He moved, as if uncomfortable, and stood up. She thought for a moment he was going to push her away. She closed her eyes and clung to his arm. 'Don't,' she said softly.

He looked down at her, unsmiling, and then bent his head and kissed her. She opened her mouth and clung to him, wanting pain, not tenderness, dragging his limp hand from his side and pressing it against her breast, longing for it to bruise her. For a moment his fingers responded; she had a wild hope that this time it would be different. But he disengaged himself gently, murmuring, without looking at her, something about lights and uncurtained windows. She stood trembling, her breasts and thighs, her whole body aching, while he turned his back on her and methodically cleared the table and put the dirty glasses in the sink, the cheese in the cupboard.

She left him abruptly and went into the bedroom, taking off her gown and getting into bed without turning on the

light. She lay flat on her stomach, her face pressed into the pillow, listening to his movements about the room, the chink as he took his loose change out of his pocket and placed it on the dressing-table, the scrape as he pulled the chair away from the wall to fold his trousers across the back, the tiny, barely perceptible sound as he wound up his watch. Suddenly, she twisted round in the bed and switched on the bedside lamp. He blinked with surprise, standing naked, on the rug, tall and white and slender, the golden hairs glinting on his long thighs and in the pyramid on his belly.

'I wanted to look at you,' she said.

He smiled self-consciously; she saw that his chief—almost his only emotion, was embarrassment.

'You're nice to look at,' she said, but she switched off the light and felt ashamed. She lay still as he got into bed beside her. She had learned the rules: while he stroked her gently she must lie passive or stroke him back as gently; he allowed her to feel him grow against her flesh but she must not touch him there. He did not speak a word and, nervously loving, she tried to be what he expected her to be, forcing herself not to respond too strongly because it had so often seemed to make him impotent as if her desire inhibited him because he could not match it. She thought, hating herself for thinking it, that he made love exactly as he must have run the mile at school: when he came into the straight, his only thought was to finish in less time than he had done before.

He fell asleep almost at once. She lay awake, feeling a mild, sad disgust—with herself, not with him—and fighting a queer constriction in her throat. She listened to his deep, rhythmic breathing, then lifted herself on her elbow and tried to make out his features in the dim light from the street outside. She touched his forehead with the tip of one cold finger and he stirred and smiled in his sleep. Her own lust suddenly terrified her, like a painful or disfiguring illness. She sat up in bed, hugging her knees, and wondered helplessly if there was something wrong with her.

CHRISTINE had gone into a nursing home in Bloomsbury. 'For observation, dear,' she explained when Mary went to see her carrying a bunch of chrysanthemums and a copy of the latest biography. Her attitude precluded sympathy; not only did she not invite it, she actively repelled it. She gave no hint of what was wrong with her, dismissing it as 'some stupid trouble which might as well be cleared up now as later'.

Mary admired her dignified reticence but could not help remembering her own mother, a plump, lively woman who sang a wobbly soprano in the Methodist choir's annual rendering of *Messiah* and whose favourite occupation was the recital of her hospital adventures. When Mary had been a child, she used to come home from school and find her mother sitting with her cronies round a pot of dark, stewed tea, discussing the various troubles, usually gynaecological, that afflicted them all. There had been a zest about those tea parties, not just a crude fascination but a lovely excitement at the mysteries of birth and death. And they *were* mysteries; to be 'under the doctor' entitled you to a certain reverence, something like that attached to a novice in a holy order. The doctor was always a distant, God-like creature in a white coat who made kind jokes on his weekly ward round and hid from you the true nature of your illness because, of course, you couldn't be expected to understand the functions of your own body.

Christine, of course, would know her doctor personally—or, anyway, his father. He would be Sir Somebody-or-other, knighted for his services to a member of the royal family and Christine would regard him as simply a superior technician, called in to repair her body with much the same attitude as she would call in the plumber to mend a burst pipe. He would

naturally defer to her, she was someone to be reckoned with; she might be old and ill but she still knew her own importance. And though she was, on her terms, poor, she was still able to be ill in comfort with a telephone and a private nurse. She could no more have endured the kindly *bonhomie* of a public ward than she could have walked naked down Knightsbridge: some people might be able to put up with that sort of thing, but not she, nor anyone she knew.

When Mary went into her room, she was sitting up against the pillows in a practical Jaeger bedjacket, occupied with a pile of letters spread out on the counterpane. She was a voluminous correspondent, she even answered picture postcards from her friends holidaying in Rome, in Venice, the Swiss lakes.

Mary said, when they had talked for a little about the weather, 'Christine, I'm sorry Johnny has been bothering you just now.' She blurted this out, feeling clumsy and rude. Christine frowned, took off her glasses and looked out of the window at the grey rooftops and the yellow sky.

'You mean about the trust fund?' She gave a little laugh. 'I see now that it was foolish of me to suggest it. It was just old lady nerves, that's all.'

'Not in the least. It was immensely kind of you. And an excellent idea after all.'

'But *much* more sensible to find a really profitable use for one's bit of capital;' she broke in, quite sternly, sitting more upright. She looked thinner and older and her eyes stood out with a kind of pale predatoriness like the eyes of an old bird hunched on a perch in the zoo. 'It's a bad thing to have capital tied up. I'm only glad Johnny has found something really promising at last. I wondered at the time whether it was a good idea to work for Lester. But of course, I can see that without money he really had very little choice. We really had nothing to set him up with but so many young people seem to start from scratch nowadays. When I married, things were so different.'

Christine had taken a sizeable dowry to her marriage bed as well as all the linen, all the silver. Even now most of the young women she knew, the children of her friends, would probably do the same. Mary had found it astonishing that there were still parents who expected to give their married daughters an allowance, buy them a house or a car.

Christine said, 'Of course Lester's boy has done very well for himself in that way. His girl's father made a lot of money out of boot polish.' She smiled. 'They're a dull couple, but it may help them to stumble through to bliss together.'

Mary laughed and said with the surprising ease that she could sometimes say such things to Christine, 'Sometimes I feel very remiss, not having money of my own.'

She said decidedly, 'Nonsense, dear. Money greases the wheels, it doesn't make them go round. And nothing could really compensate for marrying Ruth. That moustache and the heavy Jewish nose. The children will probably inherit it.'

It was a joke, the anti-Semitism was veiled, though Mary sometimes felt with Christine, that this was only because it was something that Hitler had made utterly tasteless. Earlier in her marriage, Mary had been deeply shocked to discover that Lester had a great admiration for the German military machine, and that before the war some of his better friends had been high-ranking Nazis.

Christine said, 'Before the war, Ruth would have been sent out to India to marry a subaltern of good family.' She settled back against her pillows with a reminiscent look: Lester's new daughter-in-law was only an excuse to produce some memory that had suddenly attracted her. 'Though some quite plain young women made surprising matches that way. I had a cousin, Elizabeth, who attracted a disreputable but delightful major—he had what you call nowadays *sex appeal*—and reformed him entirely. Not for his happiness, though. Her parents belonged to some curious religious sect who delivered long, extemporaneous prayers not only before the meal but before every course. Eating in their house was positive

purgatory. It was bad enough that they had taught their cook to make rice-pudding; it was even worse to have it congealing on your plate while God was invited, in the dullest language, to bless it.'

She delivered this in a bright, amused voice but looked tired when she finished. She said, with considerable effort, 'I sometimes think it was a pity we gave up India. The life there would have suited Johnny very well.'

'I suppose it would,' Mary said, after a pause. There was no point in taking Christine up on what she had said. She was clever, but her mind was no longer fluid. It had been set long ago in well-established grooves, some good, some bad. But in a curious way the goodness triumphed. Mary was not tolerant and had long ago given up admiring Christine for manners of thought that were different from her own, but there was still something about her mother-in-law that she found admirable. Where most people doubted or apologized for their views, Christine was unabashed by hers. She came from a background where you did not have to apologize for your beliefs; she could, without blushing, sigh for the passing of a colonial system because it might have provided her son with an opportunity to fulfil himself.

Mary said, 'He could still have gone out to Kenya, or somewhere like that.'

'That wouldn't be the same thing, dear.' Her eyes flickered with amusement.

Mary said, 'You look tired. I've stayed too long.'

'No.' She smiled with some energy. 'There aren't many people I enjoy talking to now. You listen to me so kindly.'

'I enjoy it,' Mary said and felt uncomfortably ashamed because she had not come to visit her simply out of affection. She said quickly, 'Christine—there's something I want to ask you. What do you think of Julian?'

She seemed surprised. 'What do I think of him? I don't know, dear. I hardly know him now though he has been charming to me the few times we have met. Before the war,

he stayed at Fitchet once or twice when we were home on leave. A bright, well-mannered boy. He and Johnny were such good friends—such beautiful boys. They were at the age when boys can be beautiful, you know—much more beautiful than girls. A joy to watch. They used to go out for the day on their bicycles and come back looking—as if they had been *bathed in gold*. . . .’

Her voice was musically nostalgic, a sad, haunting tune. She glanced at Mary and said gently, ‘You mustn’t be jealous of Julian, dear. It’s hard for women sometimes. Men’s friendships are so deep, they seem to share so many memories.’

‘I don’t think I’m jealous of Julian,’ Mary said and, in the same second, wondered, appalled, whether this was true. She had wanted to tell Christine that she thought Julian dishonest, but her suggestion had made it impossible. ‘He’s intelligent, of course,’ she said reservedly, ‘and charming. His charm is a weapon.’

Christine sank into her pillows. ‘How cleverly you put things, Mary dear.’ Her face was withdrawn, disinterested. Mary realized that she had only once looked really animated, when she had been talking about her cousins in India who had taught their cook to make rice-pudding. It was as if she had suddenly joined the ranks of the exhausted old who can only care about the past and the already dead, as if she hadn’t the energy, any more, to be concerned about the living.

She lay quiet so long that Mary thought she must be asleep. She watched her, conscious how much she loved her and knowing it would be impossible to tell her so. Then Christine opened her eyes. ‘Forgive me,’ she said, and held out her hand. Mary took it, the thin fingers closed on hers with a light, cold pressure. She said, ‘Thank you for coming to see me.’

Mary longed to make some delicately tender gesture. ‘Don’t be silly,’ she said awkwardly.

‘You’re very kind. A very kind girl.’

'Oh *no*. I'm not kind.

Christine smiled, a faint ripple on her lips. 'Why do you always underestimate your good qualities?'

This struck an odd note. 'I don't. I think of them all the time.'

'I wonder.' She looked at Mary lingeringly, her eyes amused and loving. There was no trace of the veil she usually drew between herself and the world and it worried Mary. Christine must be very ill to have got to the stage where she could speak intimately to another human being; it was something, Mary sensed, that she would only do if she were drunk, which was unthinkable, or dying.

'You parade your bad qualities,' she said, 'as if you were proud of them. Like wearing a hair shirt the wrong way out. You have such a—lively sense of sin.'

'Have I?' Mary was startled, almost annoyed.

'I'm glad you married Johnny,' she said surprisingly. Then she paused. 'I hope you will both ask Lester's advice. About this arrangement with Julian.' Her eyes twinkled a little. 'He'll be doubly interested since it is likely to be such a family concern.'

Her speech was changing all the time, growing stronger and then suddenly fading, like bells on a windy night. Now it was blurred as if she were speaking through cotton wool. Mary thought that she was becoming incoherent. She leaned over her and said distinctly, 'We're going down this weekend—tonight—to talk it over with him. Martin's staying with friends.'

'Oh *good*,' she said. 'Johnny needs someone to keep an eye on him.' Her voice quickened and strengthened almost urgently as if there was something she had intended to say for a long time and knew there was not much time left now. 'I hope you'll stay with him, dear. Anyway, for as long as you can.'

'What an extraordinary thing to say.' Mary's astonished voice was too loud. Christine shrank away from it and mur-

mured, 'I'm sorry. Did I upset you? I only meant that you are so much tougher than he is in many ways. More forward looking, I think. It must sometimes be difficult for you. . . .

Her voice faded, her eyes nervously searched the ceiling. This was not what she had meant—not even what she had meant to say. Mary saw that her courage had gone and the idea that Christine had needed courage for some reason, frightened and repelled her.

She began to talk rapidly, out of embarrassment. 'Perhaps you're right about my sense of sin.' She gave a strained little laugh. 'You know, when I was a child, there was a sampler hanging in my room, above my bed. I think my grandmother made it when she was a child. It said, *The Eye of the Lord is Upon You*. It was the sort of thing that is bound to affect one, don't you think? It probably gave me an ever-present sense of guilt.'

Christine gave a brief, cold laugh. 'I wish I could remember my childhood so amusingly, Mary.'

The room had darkened, in the last half-hour the fog had come down and pressed like a cushion against the windows. 'I hope you're not driving down tonight,' Christine said.

'The car's blown a gasket. We're going down by train. Clara's coming too, I think.'

'I'm glad. The train is so much more reliable.' Her voice was reserved, she withdrew her hand, gently, into the shadows.

11

A DARK, coughing evening. The station was a yellow cave cut off from the sky by a thick, soupy ceiling through which the announcer's voice boomed, hollow as a foghorn on the river. The platform was empty. A blackboard by the barrier

had a notice scrawled on it in yellow chalk; the train would leave fifty minutes late.

Mary waited by the barrier. Everyone looked pinched, chill, smaller than life, coat collars turned up, lips compressed against the bitter air. Faces had a terrible, grey uniformity, stamped out by cold, by limited failure, by lack of any kind of vivid hope. Mary felt cold and insignificant, nobody and nothing seemed real.

Then she saw Johnny, arm in arm with Clara and Julian. They were laughing and talking, striding long-legged and bare-headed across the grey station as if they were walking on clipped Cumberland turf on a crisp, clear morning. They looked, in that instant, like visitors from a brighter planet. It wasn't just Mary's illusion. She noticed that people glanced at them twice, made way for them like courtiers, and felt an absurd gratitude as they bore down upon her, smiling, and swept her up into their sparkling orbit.

'We're so terribly sorry. Have you been waiting long? You must be *frozen*.'

They surrounded her with smiles, with affection, mysteriously full of a bright, secretive gaiety like children who have just been promised an exciting treat. Johnny kissed her, Clara took her arm. 'Mary, you must hear our news,' she said.

Her face, golden-pale and angular, shone with a new promise. She looked younger, less diffident, as if life had suddenly offered her something more solid and definite than she had known up to now.

'Wait till we get a drink,' Johnny said.

They raced across the station to the buffet, laughing and coughing, crowded against the bar. Their faces swam, handsome and bright with cold in the glass behind the shelves of bottles.

'*Now*,' Clara said. She perched on a high stool, long legs twined round each other, big hands thrust deep into the pockets of the expensive leather coat she had bought in

Switzerland just after the war and worn, oblivious of fashion, ever since. 'Darling, Julian and I are getting married.'

She smiled, a glowing, unguarded smile, perfectly sure that everyone must share her happiness. Mary glanced at Johnny and caught a look that was half guilty amusement, half shy appeal.

She said quickly, 'I'm so pleased—I do hope you'll be awfully happy.' To her own ears the words sounded grudging and stilted though she had not meant them to be and no one else seemed to notice it.

Certainly Clara didn't. Her happiness was obvious—in the way she smiled at Julian, smiled at everyone as if she loved them, in the way she began every sentence with 'Julian says . . .' Her opinions were his opinions now and she wanted everyone to know it. She laughed at his jokes, her long, pale face shining with an almost awed adoration that was slightly absurd but wholly innocent and entirely in character. It had taken Mary a long time to realize that in spite of her age and terrifyingly Roedean voice, Clara was still a perpetual pupil desperately needing a master to admire. She was quite unable to believe that anything she had done, anything she had known, was of any importance and moved, humble, wondering and faintly ridiculous, on the fringes of other people's worlds. Her flat in Battersea was always full of people who shared only one common factor—that their lives had been as different as possible from Clara's own. They drank the drink and smoked the cigarettes she provided—she neither drank nor smoked herself—and largely ignored her. She listened to all comers with the same grave, intent little frown, finding the stupid interesting and the shabby pathetic, not out of deliberate charity, but out of innocence. Mary had once protested that she allowed any throw-out to exploit her but this was just what Clara wanted. She was ashamed because she had money and her friends had not, ashamed because she had been so lucky. Besides, they were such interesting people, she said earnestly: this woman had been in a concentration

camp, that man had had a nervous breakdown. There was some reason for relief, Mary thought, in the fact that Julian had none of the usual qualifications for Clara's attention.

Clara was saying something to Johnny; Julian whispered in Mary's ear, 'Don't you think she'll be a help to me in my career?'

His mockery was gentle and affectionate. She saw that it would be difficult now to find convincing arguments against Johnny going into business with his brother-in-law, and she was sure, suddenly, that Johnny must have known what was in the wind. He saw Julian often and Clara more frequently than she did—was it likely that they would have hidden their intentions from him? She said through a veil of anger, not with Julian but with Johnny, 'You mean she's in such wonderfully good taste?' He raised his eyebrows at her and she added, 'I can never tell whether you're serious or not.'

He smiled. 'I've wanted to marry her for a long time. It's time she had someone to look after her, don't you think?'

His tone, almost throbbingly sincere, rebuked her for doubting him and dissolved her anger, leaving her feeling churlish and awkward. The ability to speak of conventional feelings easily, to lay them out on a plate, as it were, seemed the product of a kind of mysterious self-sufficiency that had always confounded her.

Clara turned, looking radiant and handsome and smiled at Julian's last words with such gratitude that Mary felt emotion heave inside her like a child. 'Julian thinks I'm incapable of managing my own affairs,' she said.

'I never said you were incapable.' He smiled back, mock-indignant. 'I only said you were too loosely tethered to the world.'

Her eyes met his with bright invitation as if they were quite alone. 'Darling, you pinched that from Osbert Sitwell.'

He laughed. 'Damn it, one can't always be original.' He touched her arm. 'It was a very basic kind of joke. Like your dreadful coat.'

'Don't you like it? I'll get rid of it.

It was the meaningless cross-talk of lovers. Johnny smiled, acknowledging this as he lifted his glass to them. 'D'you know,' he said, 'nothing has made me as happy as this for a long time.'

His eyes were bright with sentiment, no other consideration seemed to move him except the happy one that two people he loved now loved each other.

'I'm glad,' Julian said. He looked at Johnny and Clara looked at them both with a loving pride that was maternal and glowingly uxorious at one and the same time. Affection shone in their three faces like sunlight. It was an affection that was perfectly expressed, not over-emphasized but nothing held back either: here were three people quite content with the moment and with each other. Watching them, Mary felt out—or, rather, shut *in*, locked up behind the bars of her own mean doubts and suspicions, looking out miserably at the wide fresh air and the happy free.

Then Julian glanced at her. Not triumphantly, but with a kind of academic thoughtfulness. He might have been a film director gauging the emotional response of his audience to a scene he had just finished shooting. Mary wondered why Julian should want to impress her—she felt certain that he did—and then how it was that Johnny and Clara who had been surrounded all their lives by things that were genuine and good, should be so easily taken in by the fake. Julian gave her a queer little smile and suddenly it was like falling off a cliff at the end of a dream. She had just that icy-cold sensation of lurching down into blackness. Then she was back in the chromium bright bar again and Johnny was clicking open the gold hunter he always wore in his waistcoat in winter, narrowing his eyes at it as he always did and saying the train was due just about now, wasn't it?

They were late, in fact. Whistles were blowing, doors were slamming in the narrow tunnel of smoky light that was all they could see in the fog. Julian said good-bye at the barrier,

Clara lingered for a kiss and then ran after them. She thrust her hand beneath Mary's elbow and squeezed it, saying softly, 'Darling, I do so hope you're happier about Johnny now.'

'Was it Julian's idea that you should tell me this evening?'

'You mean to set your mind at rest?' She had as good as admitted that Johnny had known already. But her laughter was sound and clear as good bells. 'Darling, no. Tell it not in Gath,'—she giggled like a schoolgirl—'It was entirely mine.'

Her expression was tranquil in the yellow gloom. Her innocence was disturbing, Mary thought, because you could never be sure how innocent she really was. They found an empty carriage, Johnny swung their suitcases onto the rack. She turned earnestly to Mary. 'In fact, Julian didn't want to tell you yet. He wanted—well, things to be settled first.' She spoke in an undertone, glancing at Johnny's back, just as if they hadn't, Mary thought resentfully, already discussed her attitude between them. Then she went on in a louder voice, 'Julian can't bear not to be liked. He's really wretchedly unconfident. If someone dislikes him he feels there must be something dreadfully wrong with him.'

The look in her eyes said *please* and at the same time shone with an absolute, glowing confidence that you only had to explain what a perfectly awful time someone had had and everyone would automatically place them a few notches higher in their estimation.

'He had a perfectly miserable childhood, his mother left when he was a baby, you know, and his father was awfully poor.' She spoke with the reverence of the rich or near-rich for poverty. 'He went to a terrible private school. . . .'

She talked on as the train moved reluctantly out of the station. Once launched over the hump of her initial nervousness, Clara was often garrulous but it was usually the garrulousness of nerves. Tonight it was different. She was discovering Julian with the enthusiasm with which an adolescent discovers a new dimension, in mathematics or the movements

of the stars. It was precisely that kind of excitement: new doors were opening, she was amazed by the light that poured in.

'Julian says his basic insecurity probably goes back to his childhood,' she said proudly.

Johnny laughed. 'I should think old Julian is as basically secure as the rest of us by now. If not more so. Take it all with a drum of salt, dear. It's just a pose to arouse your mother-hen instincts.'

Incapable of posing, he rubbed at the steamy window though he could have seen nothing real in the saffron, soupy world outside except an occasional yellow station lamp, blurred with fog. 'I wonder where we are.' He fumbled with his coat to get at his hunter. 'The train's damn late.'

The train stopped, started in a series of jolts and stopped again. There was a hiss of steam. Pulling down the window and letting in a bellying sail of fog, Johnny announced they were at a station. 'Though God knows where,' he said, slamming it shut and shivering.

Outside, porters shouted and trolleys rumbled. The door opened and a couple got in, a fat, middle-aged woman and a thin man with a face like a pale whippet under his trilby hat. The woman sat down, lifted her musquash coat behind her and crossed thick ankles in elastic stockings. She took off her leather gloves, smoothed them carefully on her lap and then coughed a little, her fingers to her mouth. The man cleared his throat and stared at an advertisement for fire insurance. The woman coughed again, that nervous little cough behind her hand. Neither of them looked at the three on the opposite bench but they exuded an atmosphere of furtive enmity as if they had always waited for this train at the same time, on the same spot on the platform, and had expected their usual empty carriage.

The train began to move, the station lights flew backwards like a string of jewels. The door wrenched open and a man scrambled in, stumbling over their feet. Johnny caught his

arm to steady him and closed the door. The man smiled his thanks, a wide, shy grin, and swung a heavy tool bag onto the rack. He wore overalls and was tall, with slim hips and a youngish, polished, negroid face. He sat down in the corner seat opposite Johnny and next to the woman in the musquash coat and brought out a Woodbine from his pocket. He smoked reflectively, leaning forward and flicking the ash on the floor between his feet. Beside him, the woman wriggled her shoulders and gave a sharp little sigh. She glanced at her husband and sighed again. Finally she said, 'If you *don't* mind. This is a non-smoking carriage.' Her skin reddened, her eyes flickered at the Protheros with a defiant angry look.

'Sorry,' the Jamaican said. He dropped the butt and ground it under his boot.

They sat in silence. The points switched and they joggled against each other's shoulders as the train jerked from one set of rails to another. The woman sat, her lips moving silently. Her husband was half asleep, his head bouncing uncomfortably against the back of the seat, his jaw drooping. The Jamaican stared at his reflection in the window. Once his hand went to his breast pocket then he sighed and withdrew it.

'Where was that?' Johnny said as they crawled through a station.

'I can't see.' On the far side of the carriage Clara rubbed uselessly at the glass and saw nothing but her own face.

'Fog's getting thicker,' Johnny said.

The train went into a tunnel—it must have been a tunnel because the electric sparks flew along close to the windows. The lights dimmed, the carriage became a small, closed world, they were very conscious of the airlessness and the heat. Then the lights went out altogether.

* * *

It was a few minutes later that the woman screamed. A high, outrageous, ripping scream like a gull.

'Edna,' her husband said. 'Edna . . .'

'Pull the cord,' she shouted and went on screaming. Clara clutched Mary's arm. 'For God's sake . . . Johnny . . .

'Hang on. I've got my torch,' he said.

It was a slim torch, shaped like a fountain pen. Martin had given it to him on his last birthday. It shot a narrow beam across the carriage and shined up the woman's face like a detail from some surrealist nightmare. Her eyes were open, her mauve lips were open and screaming.

'Edna,' her husband said in a thin voice of anguished irritation. 'Edna. Control yourself.'

At that moment the lights came on and woman was cruelly revealed, half lying along the seat, her musquash coat open, her blouse torn, her skirt rumpled as high as the elastic legs of her peach directoire knickers. She said between high, gull's cries, 'He touched me, the dirty nigger, attacked me, look at my blouse. Pull the cord, pull the cord, pull the cord.'

The screeched reiteration was horrifyingly funny. Clara snorted with frightened laughter, her shocked hands to her face.

The woman pulled herself upright, tugged feebly at her skirt. Her screams quietened to long, shuddering moans, her eyes closed.

Her husband rose, the putty of his skin vanishing beneath a wave of darkness, the tendons rigid in his skinny neck. 'You *filth*.' He stood swaying, his eyes small and intensely bright.

'I didn't touch her,' the Jamaican said. He was sitting quite still in his corner, his hands on his knees. They looked at his hands, they couldn't help it. 'I didn't touch her,' he repeated. His eyes rolled helplessly, full of an uncomprehending and brutal fear like an animal's when you raise a stick.

'The woman's ill,' Clara said, white as chalk. 'I'll get some water.' She looked round the carriage as if looking for a bell push.

'Water won't help,' the man said. 'We want more than water.' He pointed at the Jamaican with a shaking, knobbly hand. 'You . . . get out. *Get out*.'

The Jamaican bounded up, showing the panic stricken whites of his eyes.

'Don't be a fool,' Johnny said sharply, seizing the Jamaican's arm and forcing him back into the seat. The black face looked at him fearfully. 'This is madness,' Johnny said.

He picked up the Jamaican's hand. 'Look.' The pink palm, streaked with black grease, lay in his white one, the fingers limply curled. 'There would be oil on your wife's blouse.'

They looked at her guiltily. She was unmarked. She grabbed the edges of her fur coat and tried to pull them together.

'So you're calling my wife a liar,' the husband said. The words were truculent, but he looked uncertain and his voice was almost conciliatory, he 'didn't want trouble'.

'I think she must have been mistaken.' Johnny's tone was quietly confident. 'As my sister says—she's ill, hysterical.'

The woman gave a loud, abandoned cry. 'You fool . . . can't you see, haven't you got eyes?' She rose from her seat. 'They're all just waiting for the chance . . . dirty filth . . . filthy animals. . . .' She lurched suddenly towards Johnny, screaming and spitting. He moved back instinctively and then tapped her on the cheek, lightly and contemptuously. She was still for a moment, mouth open and then she burst into a passion of wild, childish weeping, tears spurting horizontally from the corners of her eyes. She collapsed noisily on the seat, a huddle of cheap fur, pitiful and ugly. Clara made a compassionate noise in her throat and went to her, a protective arm round her shoulders.

'How dare you,' the husband yelled. His eyes were suddenly excited. 'How dare you lay hands on her.'

Head down, he rushed blindly at Johnny, arms ineffectually flailing. With his back against the door, Johnny held him off by the shoulders like an adult with an angry, kicking child. They struggled as if in play, swaying backwards and forwards, a mock fight with feigned anger and soft, glancing blows, Johnny twisting his face sideways out of reach with a little, grim, controlled smile.

The train had stopped though none of them had been aware of it. The door opened onto the station platform and men surged in, an impossible number, it seemed, in that narrow space. Mary scrambled onto the bench away from the trampling feet and saw the man, caught from the elbows from behind, spit in Johnny's face. For a moment Johnny still smiled, his tight little smile and then in a second, distaste was turned into violence; he swung back his fist and smashed it into the man's jaw.

'Here, that's enough,' someone said. They closed on him, shouting. The door into the corridor was torn open and he fell backwards but struggled up again, wrestling against hands that pinioned his arms behind his back.

Somehow they all got onto the platform, the woman screeching again and draped over the arm of a man in uniform like an old coat in a sale. Her little husband crouched on a seat in front of the Ladies' Waiting-Room, moaning and clutching his jaw.

The fog was very thick, there were about eight men on the platform, station staff and passengers. The woman had begun to scream again. Mary found herself hemmed in against the wall of the waiting-room by a huge porter with a back like the side of a cliff. She pushed past him to get to Johnny. Someone had given him his hat and briefcase. He looked perfectly composed except for a cut on his forehead that was bleeding into his left eye. He was fumbling for his handkerchief, the briefcase tucked under his armpit. The stationmaster was holding his other arm. Johnny was talking to him in a quiet, man-to-man way. '. . . simply ridiculous . . . unfounded accusations . . . out of her mind.'

'The police will want statements when they come,' the stationmaster said.

Someone said, 'There he is.'

The Jamaican was standing at the door of the carriage, silhouetted against the light, his bag of tools in his hand. As faces turned towards him, he jumped down and began to run,

leaping over a trolley piled high with lumpy mail bags. He caught his foot, fell, got up, but they were all after him, the big porter in the lead and Johnny just behind him. The porter raised his arm and hit his quarry on the back of his neck, with the side of his hand, like a farmer killing a rabbit.

The fog made everything unreal, it was like watching a shadow play. The Jamaican fell behind the trolley, there were shouts, Johnny hit out wildly at the porter who closed with him. They tottered and fell, Johnny underneath, and the others surrounded them, yelling, waving their arms. Terrified, Mary began to run towards them but Clara caught her arm. 'Don't be a fool—you'll only get hurt. You can't do anything.'

Still holding Mary's arm—she was much the stronger—she propelled her into the stationmaster's office where there was a bright, unshaded light and a dancing fire. The woman was lying on a broken-down leather couch, her head on a rolled up coat. She was quiet, her eyes were shut, she might even have been asleep.

Mary said, 'We can't just stay here.'

'What else can we do?' Clara looked tired to death, her eyes glittered with tears. The stationmaster came in, a red, leathery-faced man with dark eyes in deep sockets. 'Take a seat, ladies,' he said. Clara laughed nervously.

The men followed him, the porter rubbing his arm above the elbow and Johnny held fast by a couple of men in raincoats, cut about the face, pale, passionately angry. He was pushed against the wall. They let him go, his arms were free, but he stood upright against a notice board as if bound to it with chains.

'This is disgraceful,' he said in a clear voice. It was clear that his confidence was unimpaired. He was still perfectly sure of the ultimate effect of his presence, of his authoritative, top dog voice. He threw a burning glance at the porter. 'You might have killed that man.'

There was a low, angry murmur. 'Good riddance,' someone said.

'That's enough,' the stationmaster said. 'That's enough, now.'

'Rape's enough.' The voice came from the back of the bunch of men crowded in the doorway.

'You've no right to say that,' Johnny said.

'You've no right to say it's a lie.'

The stationmaster said to Johnny, 'Be quiet. You've done enough, haven't you?'

'Interfering bugger,' the porter said.

Raging, Johnny moved from the wall. 'I refuse to stay here. I shall go to the police station and make a statement. And I shall advise my solicitor to take what action he thinks fit. On my behalf, and on behalf of that unfortunate man.' He glanced at his wife and his sister. 'Mary, Clara . . .'

There was a slow, determined closing of the ranks before the door. Expressions were dogged, sullen, belligerent. 'You'll stay where you are, *if* you please,' said the stationmaster, glowering with the heaviness of small authority. 'And no more trouble.'

Johnny looked about him, breathing hard, furious at this indignity, quite unable to believe, Mary saw, that something was happening to him that had never happened before. He was in the right, he knew it, but there was no sympathy for him, they were all against him. Nothing he had been taught had any force here, he was quite unprepared. Eventually, of course, the law would come and take over, but the law was what helped or restrained other men—he had never needed to lean on the law. He had had his own defences, his belief in reasonableness and straightness and in personal authority. Now he saw those defences were useless. He stood, straight and tall, pride stretching the skin taut over his narrow bones. Only his eyes, dark with pain and shock, betrayed that all the values he trusted in had suddenly exploded in his face.

* * *

There were to be no police charges. In the bleak lights of

the station, faced with a tired, patient Inspector, the little man with the whippet face stammered and blustered and finally maintained that his wife was ill. She had been in hospital with what he delicately called a woman's complaint; they had been on their way to the coast where she was to convalesce with her sister. By the end, he was pleading. There was no need, was there, to upset his wife with the publicity of a police court? The Inspector wearily agreed. And there was no more to it, was there? The whole thing, apart from the false accusation of assault, had been no more than a stupid brawl. No one had been really hurt except the Jamaican, in bed at the local hospital, and it was up to him to bring a civil case if he wanted to.

'I shall advise him to do so,' Johnny said. He was so intent on vengeance that he could almost have wished the man's injury to be more dramatic. They visited him at the hospital where he was in a side ward with mild concussion. He was asleep. There was nothing they could do except leave their name, address, and instructions to get in touch with them or their solicitor.

'In fact, I shall *insist* that he takes action,' Johnny said as the young doctor in Casualty washed the blood from his face and put a dressing on the wound above his eye.

'I doubt if he will,' the doctor said, grinning suddenly. He was a pleasant young man with a crumpled, impish face and the flat, lazy vowels of East London. He had heard the whole story and relished it as a break in the routine of motor accidents and suicides. 'He's not the type.'

'He must be made to,' Johnny said strongly, his mouth pinched tight. He was unable to profit by humiliation; someone else must be made to pay for it. 'If it's a matter of money,' he went on, 'then I shall offer to foot the bill myself.'

'Money's part of it,' the doctor said. 'But not all. It's a habit of mind. I daresay he wouldn't see the law as being on his side.'

'But how dreadful,' Clara cried, pale and intent. 'The poor

man—what will he think? He's been horribly insulted, injured, and none of it his fault. What will he think if no one lifts a hand to put it right?'

The doctor dried his hands and looked at her with a touch of pity. 'No more and no less than he thought before. In fact he'll probably be glad he's got off so lightly. If I were you, I should sleep on it. Be angry if you like. It's a good medicine.' He looked at Johnny critically. 'I think the cut will do. Get your own doctor to have a look at it in a day or so.'

Clara said indignantly, 'I don't know how you can take it so calmly. My brother's been hurt and an innocent man—and all you can say is that we should sleep on it. How could we? It's so *irresponsible*.'

The doctor smiled. 'You can't be responsible for everyone,' he said.

* * *

They thought they could, of course. Mary saw that they were both raging with the fine, splendid indignation of a class that had received more than justice for so long that they could demand it, without hypocrisy, for all men. The vast hopelessness, the humility, of the majority of people filled them with pride, not panic. They had been bred to take the reins and act as guides along the path of truth and justice. It was stimulating to see themselves, even temporarily, in their hereditary role: in the taxi they hired to take them home to Fitchet, their spirits rose, they spoke with one voice.

'That dreadful woman.'

'That fearful little squirt of a man.'

'They mustn't be allowed to get away with it.'

'What sort of idea would the poor devil have of British Justice?'

'Nothing could make up for it, of course, but at least he can be compensated.'

'I shall speak to Rudge in the morning.'

Clara giggled suddenly. She had a habit of giggling in the

middle of the most solemn discussions like an embarrassed girl. 'I'm looking forward to seeing Lester's face when you tell him.'

'I tell you what he'll say. He'll say, after all, there were no bones broken.'

Clara frowned. 'I wonder if he'll take it seriously. He would—if the man had been an Englishman.'

'In that case,' Johnny said in a decisive voice, 'I shall tell him that *I* am about to be prosecuted for rape.'

'In a third-class carriage.'

For a moment they both laughed.

Johnny said, 'It might be a good idea if I suggested to Rudge that he should go to see the man at the hospital. Once he's discharged, we might lose track of him.'

Mary had listened to them, half amused, half irritated. She said, 'You can't possibly do anything of the sort. You heard what the doctor said. It's *true*. The man won't want to do anything. You can't force people to do things because you think they ought to. It's not your *business*. If you interfere, you'll only make things worse for him.'

'You mean we should do nothing?' Clara said in a shocked voice.

'You could give him some money if you want. That would be quite the best thing to do. Just send some money to the hospital. You could write a letter. But no address. Or he might send it back.'

'That would be cowardly,' Johnny said loftily. 'After all, I'm responsible, in a way. If I'd let him leave the carriage when he wanted to, at least he wouldn't have been hurt. To send money—it's like buying off one's conscience.'

His tone rebuked her, set her apart, stamped her, she thought grimly, as a person without a proper sense of social or moral responsibility. She said, 'Is your precious conscience so important? And anyway, wouldn't you be doing the same thing if you badgered him with solicitors? It wouldn't bring *him* any comfort. Can you imagine Rudge being able to talk

to him, even? Rudge can only communicate with men who play golf—or who went to school with him.'

Johnny said nothing. The taxi stopped at a traffic light and the red glare lit up his face, half turned away and staring out of the window. He said softly, 'Oh, damn, damn, damn. I can't bear it. Those ghastly people—to think that sort of thing can *happen*.'

He leaned his head on his fist as if he were suffering a physical pain. They were out of the town now and driving through the Kentish villages. Mary could tell by the stiff way Clara sat that she was angry with her.

She thought suddenly that the woman in the musquash coat had reminded her of Mrs. Ames. They were in the same company of the vicious, the loveless, the vindictive. She turned to Johnny, not to remind him, but because the memory had woken a warm impulse of gratitude and love.

His head was resting against the side of the car. His eyes glistened as if he had been crying with shame or impotent anger. She saw that what had happened this evening had been only one of many body blows aimed at his pride. He was equipped to meet them still but too many would do more than damage his self-respect; in the end, they could lead to the slow, painful breaking of his spirit.

The thought frightened her. She had not helped him—she had fought him with her sharp eyes and quick tongue, her cramped ideas and set beliefs, flinging at him the pots and pans—the *kitchen furniture*, she thought with disgust, of her mind. Now, ashamed, she wanted to give him something to make amends, give him something immediately, and there was only one practical thing that was close at hand. She must let him do what he wanted to do, she must stop opposing him. He must telephone Julian first thing in the morning.

Two months later, Charles was lunching with his uncle, Joseph Fraenkel. They always lunched together on the same day every year, the anniversary of Charles's mother's death. It had once seemed to Charles a morbid, almost offensive ritual; now his uncle's regular annual invitation only amused and touched him, as his uncle himself who had once embarrassed him by his thick voice and large, expressive nose, only touched and amused him now.

Joseph was a small man with a bald head and an almost tropically luxuriant growth of hair in each broad, flaring nostril. He had been modestly but comfortably off when Charles and his mother had gone to live with him before the war. Charles had been implacably incurious about what he did then. Now his uncle was very rich, a shipowner, and he had liver trouble.

Charles had told him that his appointment to the Law Fellowship of his old college had just been confirmed and Joseph drank to his nephew's success in Vichy water.

'Well,' he said ruminatively, tucking his long, agile thumbs in the sides of his waistcoat, 'It's a marvellous world, isn't it? Here we are.' He paused, the stiff hair in his nostrils quivered as he tilted back in his chair and looked shrewdly at Charles as if daring him to deny this fact. 'My father kept a fish and chip shop in Bromley. You wouldn't remember it, though your mother brought you there when you were a little lad. He went bankrupt, poor old man, or I might have been there still. Now one of his grandsons is going to be a Cambridge Professor and the other is going to Eton next term. Next *half* they call it, so your Aunt Rose tells me. I leave that side of it to her, I just pay the bills.' He stroked one side of his nose and looked down at his plate, the fish

bones piled neatly on one side. 'When I was a boy, I used to get tired of fish. There wasn't anything else to eat. I used to lie in my bed above the shop, bathed in that terrible, hot, rich smell and feel my stomach contract. Sometimes I used to dream of the menus I'd looked at outside restaurants and wake up with my mouth watering. I'd think, when I was a rich man—how I would eat!'

He gazed at Charles with his mother's eyes, plum dark and sad. 'Now what do I get? Steamed fish and Vichy water.'

Charles laughed. 'It's the price you have to pay for social mobility,' he said.

Joseph sighed. 'Too high a price.' He examined Charles critically. 'You don't look as if you're ever likely to suffer in that way. You're putting on weight.'

'Contentment,' said Charles, slightly piqued.

'Brains,' Joseph said, with pride. 'Like my young Joe. All clever Jews get fat.'

Charles felt a momentary stirring of an old discomfort and was ashamed, not because he felt it now but because of the times when he had allowed it to affect the way he had behaved. When he was at Cambridge, his uncle had made him an allowance and he had spent part of every vacation in his uncle's house in Maidenhead, lounging on their overstuffed arm-chairs, drinking his uncle's whisky and gorging himself on his Aunt Rose's good food. But he had never once asked them to visit him at Cambridge though he knew the omission had hurt them, for they were humbly affectionate people whose pride in their nephew had been as great as their pride in their own plump, bouncing little son. He said impulsively, 'When I'm settled in—it won't be until the autumn—you and Aunt Rose must come to Cambridge and visit me.'

Joseph smiled. 'That would be nice. I've always wanted to see Cambridge. Though your Aunt Rose isn't too fond of long car journeys now—or so she says. It's age, you get stiff in the mind as well as the joints. Still, we'll see.'

'Good.' Charles smiled back and thought: it's too late,

the moment always passes. It's no good offering a meal to a man who was starving years ago. Joseph paid the bill and they left the restaurant, walking down the stairs to the bar on the ground floor. It was dark and crowded; Joseph was a regular here and he smiled and nodded at his friends, his hand on Charles's arm. Blinking away the brightness of the restaurant, Charles picked out a short, plump man with a great many shining white teeth.

'Ah—Kranz,' Joseph said.

'Mr. Fraenkel.' He flashed his teeth. 'May I introduce my friend, Mr. Cloutsham. Abba Ltd.'

Charles smiled formally at Julian, seated in the obscurity behind Kranz.

'Ah—yes,' Joseph said. His normally expansive friendliness seemed curiously shrivelled. He refused a drink, shook hands limply and gazed round him with a vague, abstracted air. He made no attempt to introduce Charles and the encounter was over in a minute. When they were outside, Joseph drew a deep breath. 'Nice to get out in the air,' he said.

'What's wrong with your friend Kranz? Does he pollute it?'

'Ah—no.' He looked at Charles cautiously. 'He came to a friend of mine with a proposition he didn't like. Something to do with a copper deal. Perhaps it was all right after all, but sometimes it's as bad to be a fool as a knave and better not to mix with either.' He grinned broadly and sweetly at Charles's baffled, disinterested face. 'It's been fine to see you, Charlie boy. Your Aunt Rose was saying only the other day that it's a long time since you came to see us. We've done a lot to the place, you'd hardly know it. There's a hard tennis court now and your Auntie has a new three-piece suite in the lounge.'

'I must come to see it. And you must come to Cambridge.'

'We'll see, we'll see. . . .' He pumped Charles's hand heartily. Charles thought: he's less of a hypocrite than I am, he knows I won't come to Maidenhead and that he won't come to Cambridge and that it will almost certainly be another year before we meet again. And perhaps not even then.

He watched his uncle down the road with a kind of frozen sadness—a part of my blood, he thought, a part of my life, shed as easily as a snake sheds a skin.

* * *

He met the Protheros on his way to the tube station. They were walking quickly, Mary almost running on her high heels, as if they were late for an appointment. To Charles's eyes, focused for the last hour on his little uncle, Johnny looked quite extraordinarily fair and Nordic. His hair gleamed in the winter sunshine, he wore a new-looking suit and a pearl-headed pin in his tie. He waved his beautifully rolled umbrella at Charles. They stopped, shook hands.

'Charles, how *are* you?' Johnny said. 'It seems an age. And we were going to keep in touch.' His smile had a warm compulsion in it.

'I thought you were out of town. I rang once or twice.

'Damn. I *am* sorry. As a matter of fact I was commuting for a bit. There were a number of things to see to. Martin's at prep school now, so it was easy just to close up the flat but we should have done something about the telephone.'

Mary said nothing, she only smiled. It was a brisk day and her cheeks were cold and flushed as apples above a sleekly new fur jacket. They both looked very prosperous and young, like the hero and heroine in a modern fable, Charles thought: the Jaguar, the foreign holiday, and the Football Pool win just around the corner. He felt distantly relieved. The last time he had seen them had been the evening Johnny had got drunk and though Charles had not thought this very important it had left a small, nagging worry at the edge of his consciousness, as small and unimportant as a light puff of cumulus on a summer's day, or a healthy young man's fear that the little stitch in the side may be cancer.

He glanced at Mary and felt a pleasant stir of pleasure. She stood very still and said very little while they talked but he had the impression of a restless, interior liveliness, a kind of

held-in vitality—like a good child restrained by its elders. The thought amused him. She had attracted him that night, he recognized, more than any woman had done for a long time, though after he had gone home he had found that all he could clearly remember about her was the quick, stubborn lift of her chin and the prim way she had of pursing her mouth when thoughtful or disapproving. He had not intended to do anything about it. Charles had few scruples about women, his impulses were usually perfectly simple and basic, but he had one rule he always stuck to firmly: with married women you left it to them to make the first move, otherwise you gave them too good a reason for reproaches later. He had not expected Mary to make any move at all and in an odd way he was almost disappointed when she did. He would have laughed out of court any outright suggestion that he had a romantically idealized picture of how Johnny's wife should behave, but in fact, though he had been delighted and flattered when she had telephoned and accepted his invitation to lunch, a queer, quixotic uneasiness had acted as a brake on his pleasure. So he had only been partially sorry when she rang him again, the day before their lunch, and said she couldn't come. She told him her mother-in-law was ill; he had not believed her though he wasn't hurt because she had lied to him. Dishonesty in women was something Charles had never blamed very seriously. Life was difficult for them; not only did it tie them to a disturbing physical rhythm but convention forced them more often than men into silly small deceptions, petty stratagems. He took Mary's excuse to mean that she had chosen to play the virtuous young matron and was half amused, half relieved. Now he gave her a quick, intimate smile to show that it hadn't mattered, that all was well.

Johnny looked at his watch. For some reason, his obviously habitual gesture, the two fingers thrust into the waistcoat pocket, the slight narrowing of his eyes at the watch face, irritated Charles.

Johnny said, 'I'm awfully sorry. But we really must go. We're late already.'

Mary said, 'We're having lunch with Julian. There's a man we have to meet and be nice to because he may be useful.' Her eyes danced, she shrugged her shoulders and spread out her hands in a mock-European gesture. 'A business gonnexion,' she said in a guttural voice.

Charles found Johnny's sudden warning frown more embarrassing than any blatant tactlessness, but he liked him for it.

They said good-bye; Charles was almost at the entrance to the tube station when Mary caught him up. She said breathlessly, 'I meant to tell you—I was so sorry about our lunch.'

Her face was flushed with running; Charles saw Johnny waiting for her half-way down the street, looking in their direction.

'I thought you'd ring again,' she said. 'Were you angry?'

'Of course not.' Her directness disarmed but also puzzled him. He wondered if it was an affectation and, if so, what it concealed. He said politely, 'Is your mother-in-law better?'

He saw from the look in her eyes that she knew quite well why he had asked and was suddenly sorry he had. The deepening colour in her cheeks made him feel a brute. Then she said in a carefully neutral voice. 'She died three weeks ago.'

'I'm sorry, really sorry.' He hesitated, hoping she would let him make amends. 'May I give you a ring and ask you both to dinner one night?' He laid a very slight stress on the 'both'. 'It's only a glorified attic in Barnes, but I'm not at all a bad cook.'

She smiled willingly. He saw she would never bear malice. 'That would be lovely. Do ring. I really must fly.'

She touched his hand for a second, lightly and impersonally. It was a gesture of forgiveness. Charles knew that however hard he tried, he could read nothing else into it. He thought, with a half guilty amusement, that he would have preferred to think of it as a kind of promise.

* * *

'I don't know why Johnny's so late,' Mary said. 'He had some things to do at the office, but he promised he'd come straight here.'

She had said this, or something like it, at least five times in the last hour. It sounded almost like guilt: the thought came into Charles's mind that perhaps she had known all along Johnny would not come yet, perhaps she had told him to come at eight o'clock, not seven. It was a common enough trick, part of the eternal female game of trying to seem virtuous when you are not. Charles wondered why it should suddenly strike him as such an unpleasant one.

He said abruptly, 'It's not like Johnny to be late.'

She looked up, startled. 'No. He's usually abnormally punctual.' She gave a jumpy laugh and glanced round the room. 'I like your attic in Barnes.'

'It's not exactly elegant. The furniture is all very utility—a bit gimcrack, I'm afraid.'

'You've got so many books.' (Go on, thought Charles ironically, say 'They do furnish a room, don't they?') But she said, 'It's more comfortable than our flat. Not so much like an expensive antique shop.'

'Some of your things are beautiful,' he said, surprised.

'I know. But all so old, so much older than I am and they'll still be there when I'm dead. Sometimes I look round at that solid Queen Anne furniture and feel horribly impermanent. I like modern things better.'

Charles smiled, though she had spoken quite seriously, sitting neatly on the edge of the sofa by the fire, in a green wool dress very tight over the breasts but so simple, so almost severe in its cut, that the tightness suggested not deliberate provocativeness, but simply that she had grown plumper since she bought it. This idea amused him and made her seem somehow younger and more vulnerable than he had thought her. He decided that if she had engineered a chance for them to be alone together, it would be hypocritical to waste it.

He offered her another drink. She shook her head and he

poured one for himself, re-arranged the bottles on a table near the sofa like a general marshalling his forces, and sat down beside her. Their thighs were close but not quite touching. He told her a long, rambling story about one of his students. It was not very funny but she laughed and relaxed in her corner of the sofa. Then he said carefully, 'Mary I haven't really told you, have I, how sorry I am about your mother-in-law?'

She smiled very slightly over her glass. 'You mean, because you thought it was an excuse?'

'That too, if you like.' He felt he had to defend himself. 'Women *do* do that sort of thing, after all.' He smiled, a consciously man-of-the-world smile.

'You would know about that, of course.'

Her voice had a sting that exactly answered his smile. It brought him up short and made him feel guilty as if he had been caught intentionally handing a child a bad penny.

'I really am sorry,' he said contritely. 'Were you very fond of her?'

'Yes. Very fond.' She put down her drink and looked at him. 'I didn't really know how fond, until I knew she was dying. Then it was too late to tell her.' Her face was carefully expressionless for a moment, then her lips shook; she looked down and away from him. 'She was too far away. I had never seen anyone die before. I didn't know they died so—so—*privately*.'

Her voice trailed off; her long hair had swung forward, parting at the nape of her neck. The skin there looked very white and soft, Charles found that he wanted to touch it, but only gently, to comfort her. Her very real uprush of grief had suddenly made her much more alive for him. For most of the time, he thought, people are illustrations, bundles of external characteristics—dark hair, white neck, green dress—only rarely are you aware of them as someone as real as yourself, as aware of them as you are of your own bones and blood. He wasn't quite in love with her nor, at that moment, did he want

to haul her into bed; he simply felt a kind of tender curiosity.

After a minute, she sat up. 'I'm sorry,' she said, 'what an exhibition!' Her grey eyes were bright and damp, her skin faintly coloured with embarrassment. 'You took me by surprise,' she said.

'I'm sorry. We're always apologizing to each other, aren't we?' Now he could see her face, Charles found it easy to touch her. He put his hand on her knee. She sat up a little straighter but she made no attempt to push his hand away. She smiled at him, not simply invitingly, but broadly and fully as if she had just recognized a friend.

Then the telephone rang. Charles got up too quickly, spilling his drink.

'Give me your handkerchief,' Mary said. He pulled it out of his top pocket and chucked it at her as he went to the telephone in the tiny hall.

It was Johnny. 'Charles? Look—I'm terribly sorry. I'm still at the office. Hang on a minute.' His voice blurred a little as if he were shutting a door or moving into a different position. Then it came back, clearly but softly. It was a wretched nuisance but there was something he simply had to clear up. Would Charles please forgive him and would they start dinner without him? He would come along afterwards of course, as soon as he possibly could.

The apology would have been fulsome enough coming from anyone else, but it lacked, Charles thought, the almost comically concentrated energy Johnny would usually pour into an explanation of this kind. He had sounded distant, casual almost—almost as if there was something really wrong. Charles could hardly believe this possible. For him, Johnny still inhabited a defended, sunny world in which nothing could ever go badly wrong, but the idea disturbed him and roused all his affection for Johnny. He came back into the room, looked at Mary on her knees beside the sofa mopping up the spilled gin, and thought with relief that at least Johnny had telephoned in time to stop him making a fool of himself. He

said, when she sat back on her heels and looked at him questioningly, 'Johnny can't get here till later. There's something he has to finish at the office.'

'That's not like him.'

He looked at her coolly, deliberately making himself half angry with her. 'What do you mean?'

She looked surprised at his tone, frowning as she pushed the hair away from her forehead with the back of her hand. 'Only that he doesn't usually take his job so seriously.'

She got to her feet lightly and easily. All her movements, Charles had noticed, were quick and neat. He itched to put his arm round her waist and feel her breast in the cup of his hand.

She held out his soaked handkerchief and said practically, 'You'd better put it somewhere, otherwise the room will simply reek of gin.'

He took it from her, being careful not to touch her hand.

* * *

It was a long time since Charles had felt any real confusion between principle and inclination as far as women were concerned. His encounters, during the last few years, had been either professionally tutorial or briefly and casually sexual. The women he went to bed with were nice, jolly, carnal girls—or rather, he liked to think of them like that. The times he was honest with himself he recognized that he was simply jealous of the time any other kind of relationship would take up. Time was precious to him, and peace of mind. If this sometimes seemed, in those honest moments, a rather niggardly attitude, he could remind himself that the long, intimate revelations he had listened to in his student days as an expected prelude to a simple pleasure, had afflicted him even then with a dreadful, suffocating boredom: they had not only been time-wasting but so alike and always quivering with the same obvious suppressions.

Putting the finishing touches to his meal in the tiny kitchen, he was surprised and faintly annoyed to find that he could still

be as absurdly jumpy as a very young man alone for the first time with a pretty girl. He had a rather uncomfortable feeling that part of his excitement was directly attributable to the fact that she was Johnny's wife. With a solemn resolve that he knew he would find ridiculous tomorrow, he determined that until Johnny arrived, he would be careful to keep the conversation on a strictly impersonal level.

She seemed quite ready to take the cue from him. Their brief moment of closeness before Johnny's telephone call might never have happened. As they talked, the heave in his blood died down and he began to feel a straightforward pleasure in her company. Her mind was quick but untrained and this pleased him. He believed, in a not quite contemptuous way, that higher education cramped rather than expanded the feminine mind—certainly clever women, he had discovered, tended to be more plagiaristic than men.

He said something of this after they had finished eating and had settled by the fire with coffee. She burst out laughing, light, mocking crinkles at the corners of her eyes. 'How very pompous and masculine,' she said. 'Keep 'em barefoot and pregnant—is that what you'd like to do?'

'Certainly not,' he said, a shade stiffly.

'But you *do* think like that. Most men do, underneath. Even Johnny does . . .'

The crinkles left the corners of her eyes and the laughter went out of her face suddenly, as if a blind had been pulled down.

'Is there something wrong, do you think?'

'He said he had something to finish. It just sounded as if he were busy.'

She looked at him thoughtfully, pursing her lips as if she didn't think this much of an answer.

Charles said, 'I'm not really sure what he's doing.'

'I thought you knew. It's a firm called Abba Ltd. Importers and exporters. I'm not sure exactly *what* they import—mostly rather queer things it sounds like. Straw baskets from

Yugoslavia, that sort of thing. Didn't he ask your advice about it?

'I don't think I was much help.' He realized that he hadn't really tried to be. He said defensively, 'One always has a rooted objection to giving any kind of professional advice to one's friends. It can so often turn out to be wrong.'

'Oh—of course.' She looked at him apologetically and he felt ashamed.

'What is Johnny's part of the business, exactly?'

'He's in charge of the forwarding department, for one thing.' The laughter crept back into her face. 'I expect what he does is more difficult than it sounds but it doesn't *sound* very difficult. As far as I can see he mostly sits in the office and makes telephone calls. Or takes people out to lunch. Julian has a lot of what he calls contacts.'

'Do you know a man called Kranz?' Charles asked suddenly.

She looked surprised. 'Yes—as a matter of fact we had lunch with him the day we met you. A long and expensive lunch. He's a nice little man. A bit stupid, but nice. Why did you ask?'

'I'd heard his name somewhere in this sort of connection.' He thought it might do no harm, one day when he had time, to ask his uncle what he had meant about Kranz.

Mary said, 'He's a shipsbroker.'

'Is he? I thought he was something to do with copper.'

She shrugged her shoulders, her face suddenly lit with amusement. 'I've no idea. Business people are all so terribly mysterious, aren't they?'

He wondered what she meant. 'It's a different world. How does Johnny fit into it? Somehow I don't see him at dull business lunches. Or selling straw baskets from Yugoslavia.'

'There are other things.' She looked at the cigarette she had just lighted and threw it into the fire. 'Johnny thinks he's a failure,' she said.

'Does he?'

This moved him sharply. He stood up and paced slowly

across the room. 'He's not really a failure, you know. It's just that he flew up too high, too young.' His didactic tone was both hardy and lyrical.

Mary said earnestly, 'I think I see what you mean.'

He smiled. 'You sound just like one of my students.'

'But I do see. It's something you could say of a lot of men. So many went to war like Johnny, straight from school. Wouldn't you say that for most of them, peace was bound to be an anti-climax?'

'Only for a few. For most of us the war was just an uncomfortable episode—a disruption. But for Johnny—perhaps you're right, it was a kind of fulfilment. He embraced war like a great, heroic dream. And in a way it was just that, you see, the last chance there'll be for anyone to stand out, alone. When they dropped the atom bomb they put an end to individual acts of bravery. Now any coward can press a button.'

He thought for a moment with a deep, frowning concentration and then spoke rapidly, on a wave of deep, emotional conviction. 'I think of Johnny in a great silver plane, flying up near the sun and looking down on the world, being able to see how it looked and how much of it mattered.' He glanced at her and added with embarrassed crispness, 'An absurdly romantic view.'

'It is a bit. You have to come in to land sometime.'

She was half laughing—with shyness, probably, but it stabbed him. He said sharply, 'You need different qualities on the ground. Like the tenacity of a weed. Better ones, simpler ones, if you like, can only exist in opposition to something, pain or disaster. When things are soft and dull they atrophy.'

She said, 'Things are always bound to be easier for fat buccaneers like Johnny's uncle.'

'Yes. For little fat men and dull people on the make and sly intellectuals like me.' He smiled at her, no longer serious.

She looked at him for a moment and then said, 'I really ought to go home. It's late.'

He was quite unprepared for the disappointment that seized him. 'Must you? What about Johnny?'

'I don't think he'll come now.'

'How will you get home?'

'On the tube. Johnny has the car.'

This exchange was suddenly uneasy. She stood up, he fetched her coat and preceded her down the echoing stairs to the dim hall. He opened the heavy door with its panels of gloomy, Victorian glass. She held out her hand but he said quickly, 'I'll come with you.'

He followed her down the steps, bare-headed, without a coat.

She said, 'You'll be much too cold.'

He sensed her reluctance but shook his head. 'It's quicker across the common but you'd lose your way alone.'

It was very cold, their breath curled white and the ground spiked like splinters of glass. On the common, the country seemed to have made a ghostly entry into London: the pearl-white lights of the nearest road seemed no more than a piece of fanciful theatre, throwing up a backdrop of trees, every still branch defined and flat as a Japanese painting. The cold, after the warm room, keyed up all his susceptibilities: something seemed to be coming to a climax.

They walked in silence. The path went through trees, then the trees ended and there were scrubby bushes and the diffuse, pale light of the tube station a couple of hundred yards away. Charles stopped and took her hand, feeling a kind of unformulated urgency.

She looked at him with mild surprise that had a touch of wariness lingering behind it. He took hold of her and kissed her. She felt very small in his arms and her face was frosty. For a moment she didn't move, though she didn't rebuff him either. Then she said something he didn't catch and pressed her body hard against him. He kissed her open mouth and felt her nipple stiffen in the palm of his hand. He felt a tight, almost painful excitement but at the very edge of his mind was a

corner of calculation, a little, ice-cold pin man looking on and congratulating him and reckoning up the times of his lectures, the times he was free. . . .

Suddenly, without warning, her clenched fists thrust against his chest. He let her go and she bent to pick up her handbag. He bent too, their heads collided.

He stood up, laughing and rubbing his forehead. 'Now—will you have lunch with me?'

She shook her head.

'Don't be silly.' He was still laughing.

She shook her head again, saying nothing, her lower lip caught between her teeth.

'Why not? Or do you think tea would be better? I'm free tomorrow after half-past three.' He caught her exultantly by the shoulders but she twisted away from him saying, 'No,' almost sullenly and started to walk away from him towards the station. She walked quickly and decisively as if she had a long way to go and might as well start now.

He watched her, astonished. Then he ran after her and caught her arm. He said roughly, 'For heaven's sake, girl, don't *pretend*.'

His body was solid with excitement and a kind of pleasure-able anger. The calculating little pin man was entirely gone. He was as innocently ready for love as a young man alone in the street after dark. He felt the small bones of her arm under her fur jacket and looked at her face as if he had never seen it before. 'You want to,' he said urgently, anxious to make a plain thing plain to her beyond a shadow of doubt. 'Otherwise you wouldn't have kissed me like that.'

'I couldn't help it,' she said.

He stared at her. So that was the line, was it? Do what you want to—it doesn't matter so long as you make yourself feel good and guilty afterwards, then you can have it both ways. The sneer flickered along the edge of his mind and died out. She hadn't been coquetting or acting the faithful little wife. She had, quite simply, been speaking the truth. He felt both

shocked and exhilarated as if he had just run naked into the sea.

13

JOHNNY was in the drawing-room, asleep in his chair. Limply asleep, his hands abandoned by his sides. When Mary called him he woke up slowly and blinked.

'You're late,' he said, speaking fuzzily as if his mouth was full of cotton wool. He yawned, widening his eyes and rubbing the corners. 'Damn—I'm sorry, I forgot. I should have come along and joined you. But it was late and I was so damn tired.'

He stretched lengthily in his chair, his eyes resting on her with sudden curiosity. Then he stood up slowly, still looking at her and said in a voice she had never heard him use before, 'You look like a girl who has just spent a cosy evening in bed.'

The pulse jumped in her throat, but he said immediately, 'I'm sorry, I don't know why I said that.' He looked surprised and contrite. 'It was just that you looked so *comfortable*.'

She laughed, expecting him to laugh too. He did smile briefly, like a man politely acknowledging someone else's unfunny joke, and then looked bleak. 'It's a pity you didn't bring Charles back with you. There are one or two things I wanted to ask him.'

'Why couldn't you come?' she said. 'What kept you at the office?'

'Nothing much.' He gave her a quick look and went past her, into the kitchen. She followed him. He was standing by the table looking tired and harassed. She said, 'Is anything the matter?'

'I'm afraid there may be. I'm sorry, I can't think very clearly. My head aches.'

'Would you like a drink? An Aspirin?'

He shook his head and sat down in a kitchen chair, staring at the wall, as if he didn't really see it. It occurred to her that he was luxuriating in a sense of grievance because he had been working late and she had been enjoying herself. Then she remembered that this was quite unlike him. She said, 'Why don't you tell me?'

'A man came to see me,' he said slowly.

'A man?'

'A Customs Officer. A man called Coker. Apparently we've been contravening regulations. It seems we sent a parcel of copper to Poland. I've been turning the office upside down looking for the file but I can't find it.'

It hardly seemed serious, a crime on the level with smuggling an extra bottle of brandy or exceeding the speed limit. Mary said, 'Is that all?'

'It's illegal.'

'I gathered that.'

'I mean it's important,' he said impatiently. 'Look—it's frightfully boring, but if you really want to know . . .' He looked at her questioningly and went on, 'Sometime—the beginning of this year, I think, the government lifted the controls on the export of strategic materials to the Commonwealth. But you're still not allowed to send anything of that kind behind the Iron Curtain. You can go to jail for that sort of thing, y'know.*' He gave her a rueful half-smile.

'Don't be absurd,' she said. 'You know that's ridiculous. Besides, it isn't anything to do with you, is it? You told me your job was just to have lunch with rich wholesalers and sell them jolly wooden toys.'

'It's not quite true—though it's probably about all I'm good for. I suppose I simply didn't want to bore you.'

'I wouldn't have been bored,' she said.

'Perhaps not. But it *is* boring.' He sighed. 'Anyway—I applied to the Board of Trade for an export licence. I understood the copper was going to Karachi. It seemed all right—

Julian had a contact in a firm of merchants there. Normally I would have rung up the P & O and arranged to have the stuff on the docks. But Julian said he'd deal with it. He was going to arrange something with Kranz. This man Coker says a vessel was chartered, that the stuff went to Antwerp and then on by rail to Poland.' He looked at her hesitantly. 'But I can't check on what he says until I can find the file. The only things I could find were letters about bank guarantees.'

'I don't really understand. Except that it's Julian's business, isn't it? What does he say?'

He didn't look at her. 'Julian's in Rotterdam. He's due back in a couple of days. I sent him a telegram—I hoped he'd telephone this evening, but he didn't. I tried to telephone him but he wasn't at his hotel. I've booked a call for nine-thirty tomorrow morning.'

'Do you think he'll be able to clear it up?'

'Oh—*certainly*.' He spoke rather too emphatically. 'There's probably some terribly simple answer I just haven't thought of.'

'I hope so.'

'Julian usually has an answer to most things.'

She smiled. 'You mean that what's happened isn't likely to be absolutely dishonest? Simply a small, technical fiddle?'

'Something like that.' He smiled back at her. 'I'll have that drink now, if you don't mind. I'll make you a whisky sour.'

She went into the drawing-room and fetched the whisky. As she passed by him to get the ice and lemon out of the refrigerator, he caught her hand and held it to his chest. It was the sort of gesture she had seen portrayed in line drawings in Victorian three-decker novels, never in real life. She felt, as she had so often felt on sentimental occasions, that she ought to have been touched instead of merely feeling awkward, standing there with one hand imprisoned and the other clutching the whisky bottle.

He said, 'Mary, you won't leave me, will you?'

Her laugh was uncertain. 'Because you're in trouble with the Customs?'

He let go her hand. 'No. For any reason.' He made a quick, exasperated movement of his hand. 'I know I'm a bit of a flop. I don't know how it happened, but I am.'

'What nonsense,' she said automatically. She smiled, wanting to console him as she would have consoled Martin for some childish disappointment. 'What do you expect after all? To be king of the world?'

'No. But I'd like to think things were opening out instead of closing in. I'd like to be a good husband for you.' He looked away from her. 'I'm not, y'know. We've never talked about it, have we? I'm not even a good lover.' She put her hand on his arm but he shook it off almost roughly. 'D'you think I don't *know*!'

'It doesn't matter,' she said quickly. 'There's no need to talk about it now.' The idea filled her with a deep, shrinking reluctance that amounted almost to horror. 'People talk about sex far too much. It's not so important.'

He gave her a long, unhappy look. 'I wish I could be sure of that.' He hesitated. 'I love you. I ought to say it more often.'

'There's no need to.' She found herself wishing that he hadn't said it now; it seemed to put her under such a terrible obligation.

'You're fond of me, aren't you?'

'I love you,' she said almost sternly, thinking: how simple it is to say this, how simple almost to believe it, to slip into the treacherous bog of easy, sentimental affection. But to think like that was in itself a kind of dishonesty, she told herself. She did love him. It was only that to say so seemed stagey and embarrassing and somehow too formal, like offering condolences on a bereavement.

'Good,' he said. His expression lightened and he smiled as if he had just disposed of some small niggling matter that had been troubling him. He fetched two glasses out of the cupboard and took the whisky from her.

She watched him, busy with the lemon peel and noticed, for the first time, that there was grey in his hair. She said, sud-

denly more touched by this than by anything that had gone before, 'Try not to worry about this business. I'm sure it isn't as bad as you think. But perhaps you ought to get hold of Rudge in the morning.'

He lifted the glass to his lips and frowned, seeming to concentrate on nothing more than the taste of the drink.

'I don't think I need bother Rudge. Certainly not until Julian's back and we know exactly where we stand.'

'You mean, you want to know first what sort of story Julian is likely to cook up?'

His frown deepened. 'Well—yes. Not to put too fine a point upon it. If what Coker said has any kind of truth at all, it looks as if Julian has got himself into a slightly tricky situation. I don't want to put anything on record that might make things worse for him.'

She said impatiently, 'I wasn't thinking of Julian.'

He laughed. 'I don't think you have to worry about me. But I'll have a word with Charles if it makes you any happier. Not immediately—sometime in the next day or two. I'd like to have a chance to sort it out myself, if I can. Out of pride, if you like.' He looked at her, then took hold of both her hands and held them tight. 'Don't worry. Please.'

She smiled uneasily. 'All right.'

* * *

'All right,' Joseph said. 'I'll tell you what I can. It's a confidential matter, you understand.' He rubbed one side of his theatrical nose and looked slyly at his nephew. 'And of course it may have nothing to do with your friend's case at all.'

Charles looked at the pattern of sunlight streaming palely across his uncle's desk. 'Of course not,' he said. 'I hope it hasn't.'

'I hope not, too. It is the sort of thing that makes all good businessmen uncomfortable.' Joseph smiled, a broad, monkeyish grin that made an odd contrast with the dark, liquid tragedy of his eyes. 'This man, Theodore Kranz, is a ships-

broker—a cargo wouldn't be his concern in the normal way. But he was in on this particular deal, my friend guessed—the word had gone round, you see, and this particular deal had a bad smell.'

He looked thoughtfully at Charles. 'Now—let's see the sort of thing that *could* happen. You can get a lot for copper since the restrictions were lifted, particularly if you can sell it to the people who want it badly. The question is how to get it there—the physical question, you understand, Charlie, not the moral one. If you get an export licence for the Commonwealth the normal thing would be to send it by cargo liner—one of the big lines. You don't charter a ship for two or three parcels of copper, that would cost a fortune in ballast. For Pakistan or Australia, that is. But to send to Antwerp—that wouldn't be so expensive. Naturally, there would be the small matter of defrauding the Customs.' He sighed regretfully. 'There would have to be double sets of papers, double charter parties and false bills of lading, one for Customs in London who think the cargo is going to Calcutta, say, or wherever the export licence so kindly issued by the Board of Trade allows it to go, and one for Customs in Antwerp. And for that you need complacent chartering brokers, you see. . . .

'And the ship's captain?'

Joseph shrugged his shoulders. 'He may be innocent or not. You can telegraph him once he has left port and instruct him to change course.'

Charles laughed. It was the only thing that had made him laugh in a long morning. 'You seem to have got the process pretty well taped for an honest man.'

Joseph grinned. 'There aren't many men who never think of the money they might make if they weren't so honest.'

'Is there any proof—about this man Kranz—apart from your friend's sensitive nose?'

The faintest shade of disapproval was visible on his uncle's face. 'Now Charlie—was that a question to ask? If I knew, would I tell you? How could I have proof anyway?' He stroked

his nose. 'Kranz works for a firm of chartering brokers, very respectable. My friend mentioned certain suspicions to the director. A word or two over lunch one day. I think Mr. Kranz will lose his job quite soon.

'I see. Did he charter a ship from you?'

The tragic eyes widened. 'Ah—so you're concerned for my reputation, are you, Charlie? No, he didn't. That's a straight answer. But if you'll take an old man's advice, you won't go round asking too many straight questions. Various people are rather sensitive at the moment. Searching their consciences or their files, which comes to the same thing in the end. With this rumpus blowing up. . . .' Joseph stopped and looked as if he could have bitten off his tongue.

Though the room was hot as an orchid house—Joseph always kept the heating on full blast and never opened a window—Charles felt suddenly cold.

'Then it wasn't just a hypothetical case you were putting to me?'

Joseph shook his head slowly and sadly. 'I never had much imagination, Charlie.'

Charles said haltingly, 'Suppose I put a hypothetical case to *you*. If you had been involved in something of this kind, what would you do?'

Joseph laughed shortly. 'Get out fast.'

'And if you'd been innocently involved?'

'Is that possible?' He looked almost shyly at Charles. 'All right, if you say so. . . .' His voice died away, he gave his shoulders the slightest shrug.

'It is possible,' Charles said. He hoped this was true. With all his heart, he discovered, he hoped this was true. And he believed it must be. Johnny must be innocent, he had never in his life done a mean or dishonest thing. Then Charles's mind stopped abruptly at the thought that of all the illusions, the ones you have about the idols of your youth are always the last to go. He looked up to meet his uncle's eyes, dark, poignantly sad, and felt sick—physically sick as if he had just

been kicked in the stomach or faced with some hideous betrayal.

* * *

'I'm sorry, Charles, I'm being a *rotten* host,' Johnny said. The thought shot him to his feet out of his wing chair like a starter's pistol. 'What would you like? There's some tolerable port, or Irish whiskey. We're out of Scotch, I'm afraid. I'm terribly sorry.'

He hovered behind the table, a conscientiously distraught host, as if there was nothing else on his mind at all.

'I don't want anything,' Charles said.

He looked, not at Johnny, but at the sofa table which was a little too low for serving drinks from if you were standing up, and too high if you were sitting down. It had slender, curving legs and elegant claw and ball feet on brass castors. Just behind it, against the wall, was a small walnut knee-hole desk that had been made around 1790, he remembered Johnny once telling him, for a lady's boudoir. When you lifted the lid, the interior was fitted as a combination of desk and dressing-table, neatly and carefully contrived. There were even two silver inkstands, the glass wells black with dried ink.

It struck Charles that the room held too many beautiful things whose useful function had been expended long ago. They gave the flat a peculiar quality of oppressiveness—a kind of museum airlessness. He remembered Mary had said it was like living in an antique shop and looked at her for almost the first time that evening. She was sitting straight in her chair, her legs neatly together, hands clasped in her lap like a good child at Sunday School. She met his eyes briefly and looked away.

Johnny said, 'Well, anyway—I got hold of Julian in the end. It took most of yesterday morning. He was *there* all right, in his hotel, simply fast asleep. The old boy must have been whooping it up the night before. And he wasn't in very good shape when I did get him. Didn't know where the file was,

couldn't think what had gone wrong. He was completely bowled over.'

'Was he?' Mary said.

Johnny looked at her. 'I think so,' he said. Apart from the slightest inflection on the 'I', his tone was level, almost too level, Charles thought. Or perhaps he had imagined it. Certainly, when Johnny went on it was without any trace of doubt of any kind in his voice. 'But the main thing was that he seemed pretty sure that the Customs had got hold of the wrong end of the stick. He admitted straight out that he knew it had gone to Poland but he said I was to explain to them that it was trans-shipped copper—not of British origin, you see. So it would hardly be their concern.'

There was a silence. Charles said, 'And did you tell them that?'

Johnny seemed not to hear the irony in his voice. 'Well—yes. When they turned up again. That was yesterday, about lunch-time. There were two of them—Coker and another man.'

'For God's sake,' Charles said. 'For God's sake.' His stomach contracted with fear that turned into anger. He lashed out with it. 'How could you be such a priceless fool? You got an export licence for the copper, didn't you? You don't need that for stuff that's going from one country to another.'

Johnny said in a low voice, 'I knew that. I thought—I hoped—it was some sort of mistake.'

It was impossible to tell what he was thinking. There was nothing in his expression but a glimmer of rueful humour. 'I thought you knew practically nothing about this sort of thing,' he said.

'I found out a bit. Enough to know that you've got to be damned careful what you say.' He leaned forward, stabbing the air urgently with his forefinger. 'These people aren't fools, Johnny. Don't let yourself think that for an *instant*. And don't, for Christ's sake, pass Julian's excuses on to them. From their point of view they'll simply sound like your own.'

If Julian's got himself into a mess, you can't protect him.'

'How do you know I'm not protecting myself?' Johnny faced Charles, shoulders straight, fair head thrown back. It was a curiously youthful and insolent stance—the school hero, Charles thought angrily, on the mat in front of the Head and refusing to sneak on his friends.

'I don't,' Charles said.

He heard Mary catch her breath. She said nothing however, only lowered her head and looked at her hands. Charles saw that they were clenched, no longer just clasped together.

The stiffness of Johnny's pose slackened. 'Of course you don't, Charles. All I can say is—I give you my word—that I don't know a damn thing about this except that I applied for the licence. The first time I knew anything was wrong, was when this man Coker turned up the other day.'

'Do you think he believed you?'

He shook his head and laughed without much amusement. 'I don't think so. I suppose that shouldn't surprise me.' Charles saw that it really did surprise him very much.

He said, 'I believe you.' He felt suddenly depressed. 'Let's leave that part of it, shall we? I can't help you much. You want to go to a good solicitor. But you ought to get your story straight before you do.' He was irritated by a flick of disdain on Johnny's face. 'It's not enough to be innocent. You've got to look innocent, too.'

He paused, wishing he could think of something to say that would soften the pervading air of harshness in the room. He said, 'What do you know about Theodore Kranz? Have you had any dealings with him? You yourself, I mean.'

'Yes. I suppose you could call it that. We took him out to lunch once, Mary and I.'

'Why both of you?'

Johnny said reluctantly, 'It was Julian's idea. I think—no, it's more than that. I *know* Julian thought Kranz would be useful. He suggested I brought Mary along too. He thought Kranz would like to meet her—socially, as it were.'

'I see. And that was all? Just the lunch? Kranz was to be flattered by being taken out by an English gentleman and his lady?'

Johnny winced perceptibly. 'That's all.'

'Are you sure?'

Mary said, 'Johnny, you wrote him a cheque. After lunch. Julian wasn't there, he had to leave early because he had an appointment.' She stood up, her whole body tense, and glanced at Charles, a look of uncertain appeal as if she wasn't sure whose side he was on.

Johnny frowned. 'I remember. But that was nothing to do with the firm. It was a personal cheque. Julian asked me to do it. It was a debt, I think—Julian hadn't got his cheque-book on him. It wasn't anything important.'

He spoke quite confidently. Charles stared at his shoes. He was afraid that if he looked up he would meet Mary's eyes. He didn't want her to know what he was thinking, which was that the simplest things can be distorted if you look at them through a certain kind of glass. But he felt that he didn't want to say any more or hear any more.

'I should forget about it. Though you must take your solicitor's advice, of course.'

He had the uncomfortable feeling as he said this, that he was running out on an obligation, defaulting on a debt he had incurred long ago. A debt that nobody remembered but himself.

Johnny said, 'Of course.' He added warmly, 'It's tremendously good of you to have taken all this trouble, Charles.'

'It hasn't been any trouble.' He smiled rather awkwardly. 'It seems to me that all I've done is to produce a few rather sour notes. I haven't helped you to solve anything.'

'How could you?' Johnny's smile was open, reassuring. 'I simply meant it was terribly decent of you to listen so patiently. It's a marvellous thing, to know one's friends are with one, whatever happens.'

His eyes were bright. Charles tried not to feel embarrassed

because Johnny so obviously meant what he said, and thought with surging relief that at least he had not betrayed that gentle, trusting affection in the way he might so easily have done. He glanced at Mary and saw her cheeks were burning bright.

Johnny said, 'Love—if Charles won't have a drink, what about some coffee?' He bent over to poke the fire which was burning logs brought up from Fitchet in the boot of the car, and Charles watched him carefully so that he shouldn't look at Mary as she went out of the room.

Johnny straightened up, the poker still in his hand. 'By the way, Charles—Julian isn't coming straight back to London. He's going to Paris for a few days. Actually, this was something that was arranged before I managed to get hold of him. Clara is supposed to be joining him—he decided that it wasn't necessary to disappoint her. Naturally, he'll keep in touch.' He glanced sideways at Charles. 'The point is, I haven't told Mary yet. I'm afraid it may upset her.'

Charles wondered how he was expected to take this piece of information. 'I suppose it may,' he said, and hesitated. It was a difficult thing to phrase delicately. 'You're sure Julian isn't going to leave you to take the rap? I'm sorry—that sounds very juvenile, but there isn't any other way of putting it.'

Johnny prodded aimlessly at the fire for a moment and then laid the poker down on the hearth. 'It's what Mary will say at once, of course.'

'And you?'

'No. Not for a moment.' He turned to Charles. 'Of course it's obviously on the cards that old Julian has done something—well—technically illegal. He may even have an idea that it's a good thing to keep out of the way until he sees which way the wind blows. But I'm perfectly sure that he'll come back from Paris with it all sorted out.'

Charles looked at him. It wasn't difficult to believe that he believed this. And he smiled so confidently that it was almost possible for Charles to believe it too.

JULIAN did not come back from Paris. He was summonsed, as were Johnny and Theodore Kranz and two directors of the firm he worked for, to appear at Bow Street on charges of conspiring to avoid prohibition on the export of strategic materials and wrongful export and false declaration on customs forms. At Bow Street, Kranz was remanded in custody, the two directors were dismissed the case and Johnny was released on bail. A warrant was issued for Julian's arrest.

He wrote to Johnny. That was all Mary knew. Johnny did not show her the letter, nor did he tell her what was in it. But she did see a letter Julian had written to Clara two weeks before the case came up at the Old Bailey.

It was not a love letter. Clara had broken off her engagement when she visited him in Paris. This was something she did not discuss any more than her mother would have discussed the details of her last illness with anyone but her doctor. She said, once, to Mary, 'Of course we could not have got married now,' and that was all. If she grieved for her own sake, it was entirely inwardly. She looked slightly older, but only as if a process that had been briefly arrested by her love affair had been set in motion again. It had taken charge of her a little more firmly, perhaps, so that now you could see quite clearly what she would be like until the end of her days: growing a little more angular, a little more brittle as the years closed in, reading all the best autobiographies, working with little or no pay for charitable institutions and listening even more readily than she had done before, to the troubles of people who could find no one else to listen to them. She began to wear again the leather coat that Julian had disliked and, though she would probably continue in a rather disdainful way to pay attention to her clothes, she would almost certainly



wear the coat, Mary decided, until it fell to pieces or until she died.

She gave Mary the letter and went out of the room while she read it. It was obviously an answer to an appeal.

' . . . in a way, you're right, of course. I have always bowed to your moral judgement, Clara. The "decent" thing would be for me to come back and face the music. But my Boy Scout days are over and it looks as if the water may be a lot hotter for me than for anyone else. I apologize for mixing my metaphors. I think the water will be pretty tepid for Johnny. The eagle eyes of the law are bound to see, in the end, that he's simply a Blue-eyed Boy who has been led astray by bad company. . . . '

The letter made Mary feel sick and angry but she thought it was more than likely that Julian believed this. Certainly Johnny seemed to believe it and after a little while, she came to believe it, too.

It wasn't so difficult. The month of January before the case came up was a particularly beautiful one; day followed day, bright and soft with a clear, high sun. They spent the weeks of the Christmas holiday with Martin, at Fitchet. Lester had brought him a pony for Christmas, a spirited little piebald with a long white tail like a circus horse. Mary protested but only half-heartedly. Lester had been very kind, had gone to endless lengths to show that the family stood four square behind Johnny, had offered to pay for the best advice money could buy. She stifled the thought that his delight in Martin's pleasure was a shade too proprietary.

'He's a tough little devil,' he said after the first ride they took together, Martin crimson with excitement, Lester solid and heavy on a powerful bay. 'Took to horseback like a duck to water. Not like my boy—not like Johnny either, for that matter.'

'Uncle Lester says I can hunt next holidays,' Martin said.

'Uncle Lester says . . . '

'Uncle Lester says . . . '

He attached himself to his uncle with unreserved adulation, followed him everywhere like a puppy.

'He's not scared of him, that's one thing,' Johnny said. He sighed a little.

'Lester spoils him,' Mary said, but without real disapproval. For once she was glad that Martin was so happy at Fitchet, so completely absorbed. At week-ends, she and Johnny went for long, silent walks and sat silent in the village pub over warm pints of beer. They weren't happy but they weren't unhappy either. Mary worried, but the first appalled feeling of shock had faded or, rather, she had grown used to it so that she no longer felt it deeply or sharply. Staying with Lester, the comfortable reassurance of money and power worked like a barbiturate. As the month passed with its soft, freakish weather, she came to believe nothing very conclusive or even particularly alarming would emerge at the end of it. Johnny went up to London during the week and, with Lester's help, wound up the affairs of the firm. There would be no money left; Lester was prepared to help but only to keep his nephew out of the bankruptcy courts. Mary stayed at Fitchet and helped Florence Prothero match silks for her embroidery and do the flowers in the church. She was treated like a daughter of the house, but she felt more and more like a visitor.

No one mentioned what had happened and she began to feel it would be a gross indecency to bring it up. Lester and his wife gave dinner parties at the week-end for local friends and the conversation was about income tax and farms run with a tax loss and sometimes the latest book or play. Someone was almost certain to say at some point during the evening that the effect of the Welfare State was not to finish off the very rich, who simply got richer, but to crush the middle-class out of existence. Occasionally, when everyone had gone, Lester would throw another log on the fire, bring out his best port, and speculate on the amount of the fine.

* * *

Prison did not come into their reckoning. Why should it? Thieves went into prison and men who ill-treated their children. Criminals of that kind did not belong to the middle-classes. It wasn't so ridiculous. People who read every day of the mounting casualties on the road never imagine that they might be knocked down today, crossing the street.

Even during the first days in court, the illusion held. It was with indignation rather than fear that they listened to the burden of the prosecution's case against Johnny which was that the personal cheque he had given to Kranz was a deliberate bribe. There was no answer to this except the simple one that it wasn't true, and, almost until the end, Mary believed that it would be enough.

Johnny gave his evidence in a clear, unfaltering voice. Certainly it was not a bribe . . . no, he had no explanation as to why it was necessary to pay Kranz this money, he had simply acted under instructions. Yes, he had applied for the export licence. He had believed the copper was going to Karachi. He did well enough under his own counsel's careful questioning but rose to the prosecution's cross-examination like a fish to the bait. Naturally, as co-director of the firm he took his share of the responsibility. No, he was not claiming he had been 'used'. At this point, Lester put his hand over Mary's and gave it an encouraging pat. She saw that he wore a remote, troubled frown and smiled to comfort him. Though she was desperately ashamed—stunned—by the fact that Johnny should be there at all, she was convinced that his rectitude shone out in the dock. She thought everyone must see it and was sure that the Judge did.

But the Judge, whom she thought looked a kind old man, was not kind at all. He reminded the jury that before the Customs had started their investigation, a sum of money that had stood to the credit of Abba Ltd. in a London bank, had been transferred to an account in Switzerland. Mr. Prothero had said that he knew nothing about this but there was no evidence to support his statement. It suggested, didn't it, that

the firm had been perfectly well aware of the possible consequences of what they intended to do? The jury might feel, perhaps, that Mr. Prothero had been taken in by his partner, Cloutsham, but they must remember that not only had the defence not produced this as an extenuating circumstance, but Prothero himself had denied it. He conceded that it was possible Prothero had been a fool rather than a knave, but even fools, he said, smiling at his own joke, had to pay for their folly. He crouched forward in his dark, high-backed chair like a spiteful old chimpanzee at a tea party.

Johnny was found guilty on one count, Kranz on three. The Judge sent Kranz to prison for three years. He sent Johnny to prison for nine months.

Johnny was pale, but pallor suited him, and when the Judge pronounced sentence, he seemed to grow inches. His face was lifted with a bright and glowing courage. Looking at him through shameful tears, Mary saw that his demeanour implied that he would have laid down his life for his friend. That the sacrifice demanded was only nine months made the whole thing ludicrous, a pompous bravery.

* * *

'I must say, he took it remarkably well,' Lester said. He spoke with a mysterious air of self-congratulation. 'Though it was a pity, perhaps, that he took the line he did.' He twirled his monocle reflectively on the end of its cord and screwed it into his eye. His face was pink and bland, he smelt pleasantly of eau-de-Cologne. Given a waxed moustache, Mary thought, he would have looked like an elderly Victorian masher. 'Rudge thought it was a pity. He could so easily have insisted that Cloutsham had simply led him up the garden path.' 'They taught him not to sneak at school.'

Lester looked uncomfortable. 'Don't upset yourself, dear. Finish your soup—it's about the best thing on the menu.'

They were lunching in the Ladies' Room of Lester's club, a large, dim room with walls the colour of porridge. Though

the day outside was bright and exceptionally clear, the atmosphere was one of pervasive, foggy gloom: Mary remembered that Johnny had once said the club had a special plant for manufacturing it.

She put down her spoon. 'I can't. I'm sorry, Lester.'

'My dear girl, it doesn't matter. Though it won't help to starve yourself, y'know. You're thin enough as it is.' He cleared his throat. 'You mustn't take it so hard. It's not such a terrible thing—the luck of the draw, don't y'know?'

Mary looked at him. 'It is terrible. It'll be in the papers, everyone will know.'

He said sharply, 'Don't think I *like* it!' Then he looked genuinely distressed. 'But one must keep a sense of proportion, don't you think? Most people sail pretty close to the wind from time to time. The damnable thing is, the regulations may well be changed next year.' He smiled in a chilly way. 'It's not as if he'd done a murder, y'know. It's a technical thing almost—a piece of damned bad luck.'

She saw that he meant this and it shocked her. The shame that ate into her bones did not touch him. It was simply a piece of damn bad luck. Presumably he thought of prison as a kind of respectable martyrdom.

'I suppose I have a suburban desire for respectability,' she said angrily. 'All I can see is people looking at me and whispering behind their hands.'

'My dear girl—that isn't important.'

'I know that. It makes me even more ashamed.' A hand descended and removed her half empty plate of soup.

Lester said, 'Try the chicken, Mary.' His voice was persuasive, he might have been coaxing an unwilling child. She smiled a little: Lester liked to see people eat.

She said, 'Johnny won't be able to bear it.'

He didn't answer for a minute. She looked at him but his face was a blank wall behind which his thoughts retreated. Finally he said, 'Oh—I don't know. I daresay he'll stand up all right. No use thinking about it, anyway, no use crying

over spilt milk.' He paused and added in a hoarse rumble, 'He's got to take his medicine, y'know.'

Mary stared at him, shaken by inner laughter. Any moment now, she thought hysterically, he'll say, 'Prison will make a man of him.'

But he went on thoughtfully, 'You mustn't blame yourself. You're bound to try to—we're all bound to try to. It's natural. Though to be honest with you, I don't see where we went wrong.' He sipped at the hock the waiter had poured into his glass and nodded. The man filled both their glasses. Mary wished he would wait until he had gone away but Lester took no more notice of a waiter than he would have taken of a piece of furniture. 'He had everything—good schools, that sort of thing. The family did their best for him—anyway, my father did. Spoiled the boy, to my mind.' There was an odd edge of wistfulness to his voice.

Mary said suddenly, 'What was Johnny's father like?'

'Funny sort of chap. Quiet, soldierly, and all that, but sometimes he talked almost like a Socialist.' He jabbed his fork into his green salad with an expression of surprised distaste as if he had just found a slug there. 'I daresay you know what he did when we gave up India! *That* was a damned odd business. Sent Christine home, and stayed on in an Indian village with some queer Quaker unit. Lived in a mud hut—went native, you might say. They were supposed to be digging some sort of well. That was the story, anyway. Naturally we all wrote and told him to stop playing the fool but he never answered. Except once. He wrote to my father and said he was trying to retrieve the family honour. Of course we knew then that he was mad as a hatter.'

Mary said with interest, 'I knew what he'd done, of course. But not that he'd said that.'

'No. My father didn't tell Johnny. Thought it wasn't necessary to upset him. Anyway, he died not long after. Kidneys.'

'Yes,' Mary said. 'I remember.' Johnny had rarely talked

about his father: she supposed that he shared Lester's view. The only photograph she had ever seen of Colonel Prothero rose up before her mind's eye and she regarded it with vague, academic surprise. There was nothing in the still, soldierly face to suggest what might have caused such a queer aberration, what had led him to pay such penance for the Imperialism he had served for so long.

She sighed. *'Of course Johnny barely knew his father.'*

'No. He wasn't home much. But the boy was all right at Fitchet. Clara too. Things were easier in those days—people could go off to the ends of the earth and know their children would be looked after at home without putting too much strain on the domestic front.' He looked seriously at her through his monocle. 'Y'know, Mary, in a way it was the end of the British Empire when you couldn't get servants any more.'

It would have been unkind to laugh at him. But the tension in her stomach had slackened. She was able to eat her chicken. Lester looked at her empty plate with approval. 'Good girl. You've got a bit more colour in your cheeks. I recommend a liqueur to round off the treatment. They've got some quite reasonable brandy here.' He signed to the waiter; brandy was brought in balloon glasses, black coffee in tiny cups. He lit her cigarette and cleared his throat noisily as if from some thick obstruction.

'Look, my dear, you must let me know exactly how things are. Money and so on. This will be a bad patch for you.'

'You're very kind.'

'You can come and stay with us. You don't have to rattle about in that empty flat. Won't do you any good.'

She stubbed out her half-smoked cigarette. She felt quite irrationally that she did not want it any more. Nor did she want Lester's money. 'It's kind of you, Lester—you've been more than kind. But I think I can manage.'

He looked visibly startled. 'But you haven't a penny, have you?' He frowned. 'I'm sorry—that was damnably blunt.'

She found it quite easy to smile at him. 'It's all right. It's almost true. But I can get a job.' She half appealed to him. 'I'd like to, Lester.'

'Independent, eh? All right, if that's how you want it. Perhaps I can help with the job.'

He sounded quite humble. She said, softening, 'That would be nice of you. I can type, though I'm a bit rusty.' She made a grimace. 'My father made me take a secretarial course. He said it would come in useful one day.'

'I daresay. But it won't take you very far.' He made a vague gesture. 'The boy's school fees, for example.'

'He'll have to leave.'

He looked dumbfounded. 'But you can't . . . it'll interrupt him, won't it? There's no need for Martin to suffer. . . .'

'I want to take him away,' she said steadily. She felt suddenly almost buoyant. It was as if she had suddenly stumbled upon an enormous reserve of strength she had not known she possessed.

He looked at her, perplexed, drumming his fingers on the table. 'Well—if that's how you feel . . . I suppose I can't stop you.' He gave her a set, disapproving smile. 'If you change your mind, the offer is always open.'

'Thank you, Lester.'

His smile grew a shade less stiff. 'You're a good girl, Mary. Are you going back to the flat now? I'll see you into a taxi.'

He spoke to the porter and they waited in the hall of the club beneath the enormous stuffed head of a bison. Mary looked at the inscription and saw it had been presented by Lt.-Colonel Pertwee-Binks in the year nineteen hundred and three. Lester kissed her before they parted, a brush of soft lips on her cheek. It was like being kissed by a bar of scented soap.

'Now—you're not to worry too much about Johnny. He's taken a bad fall but he'll get up again. There's a lot of spunk there, a lot of spunk.' He spoke with real emotion; she thought that it was the first time she had heard him mention Johnny with affection and smiled at him gratefully. As he

helped her into the taxi he said, 'Remember—if there's anything I can do—don't hesitate. Particularly if there is anything I can do for the boy.'

* * *

Martin's school was in a Georgian house thirty miles from London. Part of the gardens had been landscaped by Capability Brown. It was a 'traditional' school; the little boys with *their scrubbed, bright faces* were taught Greek and the team spirit at scratched old desks in what had once been the servants' wing, dark, chilly rooms that poorer parents would have regarded with hygienic horror. In the main part of the house, the ceilings were by Decimus Burton, the marble overmantels by Flaxman of Chelsea and the Headmaster, Geoffrey Sandlewood, by Eton and Oxford. He was, Mary thought, a perfect specimen of his kind.

He had been a young man when Johnny was at school and now, though he was not much more than fifty-five, he had the tired blue eyes and the slow, weighty way of talking of a much older man. Parents, listening to his ponderous pauses, felt that they were putting their sons into the hands of a man of the world, though in fact he was no such thing: he had been a pupil at the school himself, had gone from it to Eton, from Eton to Oxford and from Oxford back again to the school, unchanged, one could guess, except that his voice had broken and he had grown a moustache.

As a result his moral judgements had never lost their spring freshness, there was no reason why they should have done. Though like most unworldly men, he was almost irritatingly uncensorious: he sat in his schoolmaster's desk and looked down on the world with tolerance and understanding as if it were a naughty boy that would learn in time. He was the type of man, Mary thought, who is devastatingly easy to sneer at and, face to face, difficult not to feel inferior to, because he was not a type at all but a kind man and a good man.

Above all, he was sincere. Behind most people's sympathy

is an awful joy, a mixture of excitement at a friend's misfortune and nervous relief that now, statistically, it is less likely to happen to them. But when Geoffrey Sandlewood, pacing his turkey-carpeted study like an anxious, slow, grizzly bear, stopped to light her cigarette and said, 'This is a terrible business,' she knew it was a terrible business to him, that it had kept him awake at nights.

His hand, holding the match, was shaking. Mary was suddenly reminded of a jumpy dentist she had once attended who was so afraid of causing pain that she used to steel herself in the chair to save *his* anguish. She said, 'Johnny was innocent. I know that. He wasn't used to business. It must be awfully easy to make mistakes.'

He wasn't as easy to comfort as the dentist. 'He was the very last boy I would have thought capable of a mistake of that kind.'

He continued his prowling; heavy head, covered with wiry grey hair, thrust forward. 'He wasn't a brilliant boy, but he had an excellent character. It shone out of him. He was Captain of School for the whole of his last year.'

From anyone else this would have been ridiculous but coming from Sandlewood, strained, as it were, of farce through the net of his massive sincerity, it was a compelling utterance. A man who had once been Captain of his School was incapable of dishonesty.

But he said himself, with an apologetic smile, 'And anyway, that apart, he was such an open boy. Unclouded. I didn't just know him as a schoolmaster. I took him camping two years running. I used to take the boys whose parents were abroad. He struck me as a thoroughly decent boy, not complicated at all, very brave, idealistic, rather—quixotic.' He frowned as if he had suddenly hit on something there.

'Tilting at windmills?' Mary said.

'Perhaps. No. He wasn't so imaginative. Perhaps I just mean—brave without purpose.' He shook his head and sighed. 'There's no point in going back. Delving into the past. But

it wasn't just here that he did well. He had an excellent record at his public school and during the war.'

'I know all that,' she said, suddenly impatient. She had been interested in what he had said about bravery without purpose, but she didn't want to hear how Johnny had led the rugger team to victory and won a cup for the high jump. She stood up and went to the open window. The boys were playing football in the big field; their voices rose clear and sharp and sweet in the thin air. They wore football shorts and white rugger vests and uniform dark stockings with the school colours on the ribbing. Mary thought of the children who played football on the bomb site in the mews at the back of her flat. Sandlewood said in a worried voice. 'Of course one always wants to know where one went wrong. I could have been sure, in his case especially, that the School gave a good grounding. He wasn't a difficult boy.'

She realized, without anger, that he assumed Johnny was guilty. It was something she would have to get used to. She watched the game, thinking of the children on the bomb sites, the grey, asphalt playgrounds and of these children with their small classes, the picnics they held every year on Empire Day, of the marvellously moulded ceilings and Speech Day with the School Song and the Bishop doling out the prizes; for achievement, for endeavour, for good conduct. The whole thing seemed suddenly to belong, like the Lord Mayor's Show and the Queen opening Parliament and the Stately Homes where you could see over the orangery for half a crown on Saturday, to some quaint, Ruritanian charade.

She said, 'It's an awfully expensive preparation for life, isn't it? It might well make life itself a bit of an anti-climax.'

He chose to take it as a joke, laughing a little reproachfully. 'Oh—I know all the arguments against our kind of school. But I like to think our detractors are more old-fashioned than we are. We aren't the last bastion of privilege, you know. We take all sorts of boys.' He gave her an assured, attractive grin that made him look much younger. 'We know what

we're up against. We know there's no point in turning out Empire Builders any more. Though I must admit that I firmly believe some of the same qualities are still useful.'

He was almost convincing, but the hint of nostalgia underlined the truth. She said, 'I'm afraid I'll have to take Martin away,' and knew that she wasn't sorry to have this opportunity. She thought: I don't want Martin to spend the rest of his life looking back over his shoulder.

'I hardly think that's necessary.' He pursed his lips, frowning. 'None of the boys know what's happened. We only have *The Times* in the Prefects' room and that's dull reading when you're twelve years old. Naturally, next term we shall have to be careful. Some of them will find out in the holidays. I shall do my best to see he isn't hurt.'

She felt humiliated by his kindness. 'It isn't that. I can't possibly pay the fees. There isn't any money.'

If he was surprised, he concealed it. 'You mustn't think about that, Mrs. Prothero. We're a comparatively rich school, luckily. We don't have to run it as a commercial organization entirely.'

'I don't want charity.'

'Come, come, Mrs. Prothero.' His smile rebuked her gently. He offered her a cigarette from his gold case and lit it. 'It would hardly be that. Martin is a clever boy. We're very pleased with him. We like to keep boys who have a chance to get a scholarship. The school benefits from it, after all.'

It was nicely put, but then he would always put everything nicely. He would never hurt or humiliate a living soul. And then, perversely, she felt stifled by his taste, his manners, his gentle, upper-class courtesy. She had sometimes felt this with Johnny and always when they were at Fitchet. It was as if a vulgar little demon inside her longed to shout rude words, blow raspberries, hurl bricks through their civilized windows. It wasn't that she hungered for a world where people were ignorant, ill-mannered and cruel. It was simply that Sandlewood's world seemed too cosily perfect—like one of those

English drawing-room comedies where the carpets are soft, the curtains drawn against the ugly world and no one speaks discordantly or makes a sound that will offend the most fastidious ear. You can't live in that drawing-room all your life unless you're very rich or very stupid or very lucky, and the streets outside are colder and harsher. She wanted Martin to get used to them before it was too late.

She said, 'I would prefer to take him away, I think.'

'Let him stay until the end of the year, at least.' He bent on her his peculiarly steady gaze. 'We often do this, you know. The middle classes aren't as well off as they were. It's not the first time. Lots of professional people occasionally find themselves in—difficulties. We're only too willing to help out.'

'I'm sorry, I can't accept that.' She felt a rush of healthy confidence, as if a fresh wind had begun to blow through her mind. 'I don't want to be classed with people who want to go on as if the world hadn't changed. I don't want anything I can't pay for.' It struck her with amusement that this was just the sort of thing her father would have said. The thought of his steady strength, his robust independence, comforted her. She smiled at Geoffrey Sandlewood.

But she had been too abrupt. He met her smile with a frosty look. 'We have already remitted a proportion of Martin's fees, Mrs. Prothero. Your husband wrote to me some time ago—when Martin first came to us, in fact.'

The ground fell from under her feet. 'I'm terribly sorry. . . . I had no idea. . . .'

He looked ashamed at once. 'I'm sorry, Mrs. Prothero. I shouldn't have told you. It was wretchedly unfair.'

'No. You were right to tell me.' She stared at the carpet and thought she would remember the pattern all her life. 'What do we owe you?'

He said gently, 'There is no question of a debt. Please believe me. We are glad to do it.' He looked worried, genuinely distressed. 'Of course, you mustn't let it affect your decision, Mrs. Prothero. But Martin's a sensitive boy—a

change at this time might be difficult for him. He's happy here. These are the only arguments to concern you. Think it over—until the end of the term, anyway.

'Thank you,' she said. 'I'll think it over

15

ONE day, towards the end of the next six weeks, Clara took Mary out to lunch. Afterwards she kissed Mary's cheek and told her in a nervous little rush of speech that she was being 'perfectly splendid about everything'.

Mary kissed her back, ashamed. She felt a fake. It struck her as she walked back to her office that the last six weeks had been a queer, not very real time that she had lived through with remarkably little pain or distress. It was as if the shock of Johnny's imprisonment had anaesthetized her: everything that had happened since affected her no more than a pin prick on a deadened limb. She assumed from what Clara had said that she must have reacted in all the right ways, to sympathy shown the correct face, distress, shame, and a tender wifely support of her husband. None of it was hypocritical but it wasn't real either. She had simply abdicated her mind and let convention take over. She thought guiltily that no one had guessed—certainly, Clara had not guessed—that there was nothing behind her face and voice but a foggy vacancy, temporarily let to second-hand thoughts and emotions.

* * *

Lester had found her a job—tactfully, not in his own firm but with another group of trade magazines. It was a leisurely job and quite mechanical but apparently she did it well because at the end of the month they raised her weekly wage by

ten shillings. She liked the job, the routine was soothing, the chatter of the other typists soothed her like a lullaby. They were the kind of girls she had grown up with, she knew the kind of homes they came from and how they spent their Sundays: the long lie-in, the cup of strong sweet tea brought up by Dad in his shirt-sleeves, the ritual weekly hair-washing, the large Sunday dinner, the walk, the cinema, the cuddle in the park. She felt a deep nostalgia for the small, safe perspective of their lives; when she talked to them, a slight suburban laziness crept back into her own voice.

Sometimes one of them would invite her to have coffee or go to the pictures after work but she always refused. By the middle of the afternoon and overwhelmingly by the evening, the only desire she was conscious of had overtaken her. She longed for sleep. Immediately after supper she went to bed, giving herself up with a sensual pleasure to the sweet feeling of falling into a pit of blackness and delicious silence. She had never needed an alarm clock before, now it wasn't loud enough. She had to ask the telephone exchange to call her and some mornings they rang for as long as five minutes before she dragged herself painfully upwards, out of a deep well, and stumbled to the telephone.

Except at her job, she saw very few people. She did not go to Fitchet, nor, after one tactfully vague letter did they press her to. Lester, it seemed, had accepted her eccentric independence though she guessed that he deplored it.

Once, she saw Charles. He wrote to her after the trial, a long, gentle letter, saying that he would be glad to help in any way he could and asking her if she would like to go to the theatre one evening. She replied, thanking him for his sympathy and ignoring the invitation. He wrote once more and she didn't answer. He telephoned the office when she was out to lunch and left his number: she did not ring back. Then he came to see her one evening when she was eating her supper in the kitchen. He brought a rather squashed bunch of violets which he pulled out of his pocket and held out to her. She

didn't take them and he put them down on the table. 'Aren't you going to offer me a cup of coffee?' he said.

She poured out the coffee and they sat in the kitchen at opposite ends of the table with the violets and the remains of her boiled egg between them. He asked her how she was, if there was anything he could do. She shook her head: she found she had a physical difficulty in answering him, her tongue seemed thick and swollen in her mouth. When he left, she opened the door for him and his arm brushed against her breast as he passed in the narrow passage. She recoiled as if he had hit her and stood rigid, hands flat against the wall. He looked at her for a moment. Then he said, 'You don't have to act like that. I'm not a *rapist*.'

His voice was a lash of contempt. For a moment she felt as if she had been shocked alive—as if she had just touched a naked electric wire or nearly been run down by a bus. For a little while after he had gone, she cried with anger. She undressed, weeping, and crawled into bed. Nothing—nobody—was important enough to keep her from sleep.

* * *

The only person she wanted to see was her father. His response had been categorical, very masculine, very much of his generation and she found it soothing. She had tried to convince him that if Johnny was not completely innocent, he was only partially guilty. He listened approvingly: a Wife should stand by her Husband. But his rigid, intimate acquaintance with right and wrong admitted no fine shades. There was no smoke without fire and British Justice was the finest in the world. He did not condemn Johnny, nor would he make excuses for him but, on the other hand, having once expressed his horror and shame, that was the end of the matter.

'I'll stand by you, my girl,' he said, leaning back in his favourite chair in the best front-room and drawing on his pipe. 'Whatever happens, you and Martin will always have a Home here.'

He spoke, as he wrote his letters, in capitals and with stern munificence. He might have been a Victorian peer offering his abandoned daughter shelter in the old family home, instead of a hard bed in a tiny house that in recent years had become an old man's lair, dark, frowsty and not even particularly clean. It might have been comic, she thought, but it wasn't; it was an attitude as wholesome and refreshing as a glass of cold milk on a boiling day.

She looked at him, puffing his foul pipe, slippered feet propped on a hassock, his cherished possessions on a table at his side—a framed, signed letter from Kitchener, sent to him when he got his D.S.M. in the first war, an elaborate fob watch bought with the first money he ever earned and three small wooden elephants whose origin she had never discovered—and felt as safe as she felt in bed. She thought of the text that had always hung above her bed in this house and remembered that when she was a child, she had confused the eye of the Lord with her father's eye; bright, humourless and righteous, it watched over her in everything. His narrowness was his strength; she thought that in a way it had stunted her moral growth. She did not believe as he believed, nevertheless, she had always been checked and confined by his views. Now she had shaken them off, grown out of them as out of a childhood dress, too worn, too small, she felt naked. She did not know what was right and what was wrong, any more. She could only answer him in the kind of words he would expect her to use.

'It's sweet of you, Dad, but I ought to stay in the flat. Johnny would like me to. I want to have it ready for him to come back to.'

He nodded solemn approval and she felt a sharp disgust with herself. She said, suddenly wanting comfort, 'The awful thing is—most of the time I feel so *bored*.'

'That's only to be expected,' he said. 'You've had a shock. The mind needs boredom as the body needs sleep. It's Nature's way.'

He looked at her through a cloud of smoke. 'You look as if you could do with more sleep. You look pale. Do you eat enough? You've got to keep up your strength, you know.'

She saw him every Saturday and the questions were always the same but they never irritated her as they would have done once.

'Do you see Clara? A fine girl—but she'll never be the woman her mother was.'

His pronouncements were frequently mysterious but they did not irritate her either.

'How's Martin? At least, you've got that to be thankful for. The boy is getting a good education. Boarding school is the finest thing out for a boy.'

'I'm going to see him tomorrow,' she said.

That was the sixth Saturday after Johnny had gone to prison. She had not wanted to see Martin before, she had not wanted to lie to him, though the lies would have to start sometime.

'What are you going to tell him?'

She hesitated. 'Just—that Johnny's away on a business trip.'

The flesh of his forehead drew together, making a deep, vertical mark between the bristly eyebrows that were still thick and dark. 'I'm glad you're going. It'll be a comfort to you.' He tapped out his pipe deliberately in the brass ashtray and reached out for the book he had been reading. It was a paperback with a blood-stained knife on the cover; Mary was always astonished by her father's reading matter. He turned the pages carefully with strong, swollen fingers and took out three pound notes, very new and crisp, quite uncreased. He handed them to her. 'I'd like you to take him out properly. Give him a good lunch. Boys expect it.'

She took the money. There was a painful lump in her throat.

He said, 'What are you going to do with him in the holidays? You'll still be working. London's no place for a boy if his mother is out all day.'

'I expect Lester will want him to go to Fitchet.'

'Well—he'll be all right there.' He looked at her keenly. 'It's good of Sir Lester to take such an interest in him. Not every man would, in his position. You mustn't take it for granted, you know.'

'I don't,' she said humbly.

'I'm glad of that.' He paused. 'Now if—*if* mind you—Martin would like it, I would be just as happy to have him here. The other day I looked out some old tools of mine, sharpened them up a bit. I could teach him a bit of carpentry and the lady next door has very kindly said she would cook our dinner. I don't expect Martin would enjoy my cooking much.' He smiled at her. 'I'd like to have him. Just tell him that. Not that he ought to come because his Grandad wants it.'

'No,' she said. 'No, I won't tell him that.'

* * *

'I'll go if you want me to,' Martin said. 'But I can't take Wildfire to Grandad's can I?'

'No. You can't take your pony there. But you can do some carpentry. You could make a rabbit hutch. Perhaps Grandad would let you keep a rabbit.'

'I don't like carpentry. I'm bad at it,' he said simply.

For a moment she felt unreasonably angry with him, but only for a moment. He had accepted what she told him about Johnny, he wasn't a suspicious child, but she thought he looked unnaturally pale and shut in. He had eaten very little lunch. Now, although they had been walking in the woods for about an hour, he had said very little and there was no colour in his cheeks. She wondered if anyone had said anything to him. She doubted it, she trusted Sandlewood, but it was always possible. She suggested that they should collect fir cones but he lost interest very quickly and walked along, hands in pockets, listlessly answering her questions but volunteering nothing.

They went back to the hotel for tea. She was beginning to be frightened. She asked him if anyone had upset him and he

shook his head almost sullenly. The hotel was full of other parents and their boys, having tea in the big, open lounge. As they went in, she imagined a kind of hush running round the neatly spread tables, a pause in the consumption of toasted scones. She looked round nervously, fancying that one person had looked away too quickly, that another had watched them with too frank an interest. One man did look, she was sure, a bold, hard-eyed stare. She turned away and felt his eyes like a knife in her back. She said to Martin, 'Do you like all the other boys?'

'Yes,' he said. 'They're all right.'

'You like them all, do you? Surely there must be some you don't like? Boys say silly things sometimes.'

'Oh, don't keep *on*, Mummy,' he said restlessly.

He sipped at a glass of milk and crumbled the paste sandwich on his plate. The familiar need for sleep crept over her. She peered covertly at her watch and saw with shamed relief that there was only half an hour before they would have to go back to the school.

As they left, he burst into tears and said he had a headache.

She only half believed him and made light of it. Martin had always been inclined to make a fuss when he was ill. He was afraid of pain, more fearful in anticipation than when he actually hurt himself, a form of physical cowardice Johnny had never been sympathetic to. While Johnny had been at home, she had distrusted his robust, Spartan attitudes; now she was on her own, she felt she should uphold them. 'I expect you ate too much lunch,' she said. 'All that ice-cream.'

'I didn't eat it,' he said truthfully. He made a face. 'I feel sick.'

They were about to get into the car. He rushed suddenly into some laurel bushes at the side of the car park and vomited. She wiped his mouth and he said he felt better. She wasn't particularly disturbed, her eyes were heavy with sleep, but she said, 'You'd better tell Matron.'

He shook his head. 'It's silly to make a fuss.' He crinkled

up his eyes, looking suddenly like a small, amused adult. 'She's a great one for the castor oil.' His spirits seemed to have risen though there was a strained look about his eyes. When they got to the school, he ran in quite cheerfully, turning at the door to wave his hand.

* * *

In the middle of the night she woke from a drowned sleep, the telephone bell sawing through her head. It was Sandlewood. It took some time before she understood what he said. She wondered, long afterwards, if he had thought she was drunk.

Martin was ill. He had vomited repeatedly; they had taken his temperature and found it soaring. The doctor had come and sent him to hospital with suspected meningitis.

Sandlewood was reassuring but he sounded worried. When she got to the hospital they said there was hope, but it was difficult to believe it. He was pure, chalk white and his eyes were closed. He moved his head fretfully from time to time and gave a harsh, sad cry like a sea bird's. They had put him in a small room off the men's ward. It was nearly dawn and the hospital echoed with the clatter of basins and trolleys and cups of tea. A patient, a thin cadaver in striped pyjamas and stained brown dressing-gown, brought her a cup, thrusting it uneasily through the door with a long, bony hand covered in brown patches. Mary put the tea down by the bed and drank it later when it was cold, with a sour, creamy scum on top. Martin had not opened his eyes. She sat, holding his hand which was hard and dry, calloused like a navvy's. Her whole body ached with pain as if it were slowly coming back to life.

The doctor was enormous, a great bruiser of a man with a body like a tree trunk. He said, 'He's got a good chance. He's a fine, healthy boy.'

She didn't believe him. She distrusted them all, the tree-like doctor, the kind, ignorant nurses, the trim little specialist who came and went away again. There was nothing she could

do. She sat by his bed and prayed. She couldn't think of a prayer. She said, 'Little body, do not die'. It was a poem she had once thought sentimental. Please don't let him die. If he lives, I'll be a good girl for ever and ever amen. She was ashamed of herself for praying like that. She chewed at her handkerchief, pulling holes in it with her teeth.

He woke up once or twice and looked at her. There was no expression in his eyes, not even bewilderment or pain. During the afternoon of the first day—or it might have been the day after—he began to call for Johnny. 'Daddy,' he said, 'Daddy,' in a quiet, flat voice, not at all like a child crying out in a nightmare, but with the steady, determined hopefulness of a child who refuses to go to sleep.

Sandlewood came in. He tiptoed up to the bed like a nervous bear, hunched in a thick brown overcoat. Martin called for his father. Sandlewood put his hand on Mary's shoulder and gripped it. 'I'll see the doctor,' he said. 'Perhaps something can be done.'

* * *

She never found out how it was arranged. When he came, she was asleep in the nurses' wing in the bed of a fat, Irish girl who had tucked her up with tea and toast and a blue sleeping pill. She never knew whether her absence was deliberate or not—perhaps they had feared an emotional scene at the bedside. Certainly, no one told her he was coming, no one told her he was there. She simply woke at five-ten by the Irish nurse's wrist-watch that lay on the table among the lipsticks and the jars of Pond's, dressed, and went back to the ward, unwarned, free as air.

He was sitting by Martin's bed and for an instant it was the most natural thing in the world. Then he looked up and it wasn't natural any longer. He looked at her, a straight look, but he blushed, slowly and painfully. She felt the colour come into her own face: they stood on either side of the child's bed, crimson as peonies. Embarrassment was solid and blank as a

brick wall between them. He got up and held out *his hand* to her as if they were strangers.

She said, 'How are you?'

'Not so bad. And you?'

She thought that he looked exactly the same, a little fatter, if anything. 'You've got fatter,' she said. They stared at each other; suddenly his eyes spurted tears. He turned away and she stood, sorry and revolted, looking at Martin. He was sleeping with his mouth slightly open. Johnny touched his arm. 'The specialist's been. He says he's much better.'

'Thank God.'

'It must have been a dreadful time for you. I'm sorry. Sorrier than I can say.' He gave her a glistening look, the track of his tears still shining at the corners of his eyes. She tried desperately to think of something to say. 'I'm still in the flat, everything's all right, you mustn't worry.' Then the sister came to the door of the cubicle, starched apron crackling. 'Mr. Prothero,' she said. Her eyes rested on them both with guarded excitement.

'I've got to go.'

'Yes.'

'Love—don't worry.'

She felt her mouth crack open in a smile. 'No. . . .

She didn't look round. She listened to the polished creak of his footsteps receding.

* * *

In the sister's room, off the ward, the doctor said, 'He'll be all right now. He's a strong, healthy child. We're all so pleased.'

'*You're* pleased,' she said. She felt, irrationally, darkly and bitterly angry. That pompous, solemn voice would just as solemnly have pronounced Martin dead or done for. Or would it? Fear, more histrionic than real, tightened her throat.

His glance forgave her, understood. He raised himself on his toes, red hands clutching white lapels. 'Believe me, Mrs.

Prothero, it's true. We *are* pleased. It's so often we have to tell people the other thing.'

The royal 'we'. Like kings, she thought, doling out a chance of life like a reward for good conduct. 'How often do you tell people they're going to die?' she said. 'Why should I trust you?'

His voice was cold, emphatic. 'I'm not lying to you, Mrs. Prothero. As far as I can judge, barring the unforeseeable, your boy will get well.'

She believed him. She had believed him in the beginning. She said, 'I'm sorry. I was thinking of something that happened a long time ago.'

'Naturally, you're over-wrought.' He glanced at her over horn-rimmed spectacles. 'It was fortunate your husband was able to come,' he said, for all the world as if Johnny had managed to drag himself away from some important business conference. 'One can never tell in these cases. . . .' He hesitated. 'He behaved very well. It can't have been easy for him.'

His intention was purely kind. But there was a roaring in her ears and a painful swelling in her throat. She wanted to hurl something heavy and hard into that kind, smug, professional face. 'What did you expect?' she shouted, banging her fist on the desk, spoiling for a brawl as eagerly as a drunken Irishman. 'What did you expect? Did you think he would steal your stethoscope?'

16

CLARA was waiting in the lobby. She looked like a *Vogue* illustration, tall, rangy; hair, eyes and coat the colour of an autumn leaf. She took Mary's hand. 'I'm so very, very glad, dear.'

Mary's eyes filled with tears.

Clara said, 'I've telephoned Lester. He was almost demented.'

'Thank you.'

She stood passive while Clara drew her hand through her arm. 'You look tired to death. . . . I've ordered a taxi. We'll go straight home . . . bed and a hot water bottle . . . you're not to worry about one thing more.'

Her voice flowed on, gentle and understanding, and for a moment Mary drifted with it like an empty boat on a kind, indifferent sea. But her heart was racing like an engine when the accelerator cable snaps: you take your foot off the pedal and it goes on racing faster and faster, a whirl of undirected, uncontrolled energy. It wasn't like anything that had ever happened to her before. She wanted to run, to shout; she felt she was on the verge of becoming a quite different person.

She shook her head. 'If you don't mind . . . I'd rather be on my own.'

'Of course, dear.' A slight, kind perplexity creased the autumn-tinted face but the understanding was unchanged. Clara was handling her with awe-struck care as if she were a piece of her mother's Meissen china. 'You take the taxi then.'

'I don't want the taxi. I think I want to walk. I can get a bus back to town.'

She felt guilty as she left, knowing that Clara was standing on the steps of the hospital, watching her with her long, kind, worried face, but she forgot her as soon as she turned the corner. It was soft, muggy weather, the rain blew into her face, warm as tears. Then she walked, not feeling tired at all, her veins swelling to bursting point, the way they do when you have dived too deep.

She found she was enormously hungry. She went into a café and ate bacon and eggs and drank three cups of sweet hot tea. There was a couple sitting opposite her at the same table, a small, wrinkled, simian man and his wife—a soft, round face

like a lump of risen dough. She smiled at Mary as she polished off her plateful, a smile redolent of goodness and motherliness. Mary smiled back at her, suddenly and absolutely filled with rapture. It stopped her breath and brought tears into her eyes.

She left the Lyons and caught a Green Line bus. She got out at Leicester Square and walked slowly, watching the people queueing at the picture palaces, gawping in the shop windows and the glittering glass cages of the snack bars, perfectly happy to be alone.

She went into a pub and ordered a double brandy. She looked round the crowded bar and loved everyone, the blonde tart with the orange gash of a mouth and skin white as flour, the pimply student in his grubby duffle coat, the mousy couple sitting in glum, domestic silence, sipping their I.P.A. and watching television in a corner. The brandy went down like golden fire. She asked for another.

'Are you ill?' the barman said. His pale face, pitted with small, dark holes like grapeshot wounds, was narrow with suspicion.

She smiled copiously, 'No. I just want a double brandy.'

She stood against the wall. There was a man and a girl standing at the bar in front of her. The man was fresh-faced and alert-looking, his navy suit was shiny at the seams. His girl had a tight new perm and a camel hair coat and mock pearl ear-rings; her mouth was soft and her skin was soft, she looked as if she might smell of baby powder. She was the kind of girl for whom everyone buys a Bravington Ring, whose husband saves for the future: the trim little house with a crazy-paving path, the set of door chimes and a washing machine on the never-never. Nothing much would ever happen to them, Mary thought, but they wouldn't expect it to. She sipped her brandy and wished them happiness, sentimentally foreseeing their long bus ride home, the lingering kiss in the shop doorway, their calm, uncomplicated rapture. They toasted each other, the man raising his glass of Mild and Bitter, the girl

her Baby Cham. Mary watched them, happy for the moment just to be there. She didn't want to get drunk, she didn't want to talk to anyone, she didn't want to smoke.

The man turned his head and whispered in his girl's ear. She swayed a little towards him, her lips parted and she gave a low laugh. They looked at each other. Their bodies did not touch, there was nothing remotely indecent in their behaviour, but it stirred Mary's senses; not sadly and furtively like pornography, but profoundly and painfully. She wasn't directly envious, it was simply that happiness had suddenly curdled inside her. She turned away, put her drink down on a ledge behind her head and felt in her bag for cigarettes.

Someone snapped a lighter under her nose. She said, 'Thank you,' and he nodded at her empty glass. 'Like another?' He was middle-aged, good-looking, respectable, blue eyes nervous and intent above his stiff white collar.

'That's very kind of you.'

He brought the brandy and they talked. He usually went straight home after the office but today he had won something on the four-thirty. They had a little syndicate at the office. This was the first time they had been lucky and he had promised himself a little celebration. He asked Mary if she worked in an office, his glance slyly curious. She said yes, and looked at his hands. They were large and well kept, with thick, masculine fingers. He told a borderline joke, watching her to see how she took it. She smiled uncertainly, conversation petered out, the offer of another drink was faintly reluctant as if he saw he had made a mistake and couldn't see how to get out of it.

She shook her head and suddenly saw herself; Mary Prothero, a pale, youngish woman in an expensive coat, her mother-in-law's diamond ring on her finger. Mary Prothero who would like to get drunk but wouldn't because women don't get drunk. Mary Prothero, who would like to pick up a man but simply didn't have the guts to do it. She didn't much like Mary Prothero. The best thing she could do with her was

to take her home and put her to bed with a hot water bottle. She said, 'I'll change my mind, if I may.'

'Good,' he said, falsely enthusiastic. She slipped out of the door as he was diffidently elbowing his way to the crowded bar. She caught a bus at random and got out three stops later. The bus was going to Barnes. She watched it lurch into the distance, lights gleaming on the black, wet road and thought of Charles. For a long time it had half-frightened her to think of him; the strength of her desire had made her shocked and ashamed. Decent women did not feel like that. This was something her upbringing had taught her and her marriage had done nothing to change it. Now she gave way to the thought of Charles with the same feeling of guilty luxury she had had when she was a child, eating forbidden sweets on Sunday—dwelling on his dark, tangly hair, the touch of his hands, the feel of his skin. Like a bitch on heat, she thought bitterly, despising herself and then thought, more rationally, that it was no answer at all or, at any rate, no more of an answer than the half swallow of water left in the drinking flask in the desert; the moment's relief that makes the next more brutal. She began to walk towards home. The rain had stopped now and the wind was sharp.

Someone called to her. She looked up and saw a man coming towards her. She recognized him after a moment of bleak disappointment, a friend of Clara's, Sebastian something-or-other, a pushing, opinionated young man with red hair. Clara said he had great talent.

'Hallo,' he said, 'what a surprise,' tucking his hand in the crook of her elbow and marching along beside her. He looked down from his bony height with a consciously ironic smile. 'I thought you always spent Saturdays with your father.'

She didn't understand, but then she hardly expected anything he said to make sense. He might have been a gaunt, gabbling visitor from another world altogether. Then she remembered. Clara had given her the invitation weeks ago and she had automatically refused it.

'Oh yes,' she said. 'Your party. I'm sorry. . . .

He said broodingly, 'You didn't want to come. You might at least have been honest about it.'

'But I was.' He lifted his eyebrows with affected, amused incredulity and she knew he would not believe her unless she told him the truth, and she did not want to talk about Martin to him. It would take too long, she would have to linger and be swamped by his sympathy and almost certainly—she remembered suddenly an appalling evening spent in his company in Clara's flat—an account of a similar crisis in his own childhood. Any excuse would serve to set him off on a spate of dull reminiscences of his own. She said, 'Is the party over already? Was it fun?'

'No,' he said darkly, his mouth set. 'All the wrong people. It just didn't jell.'

They reached the corner. She hoped they would part there but he was tenacious. They had nothing to say to each other but he would cling to anyone rather than go home alone. We are alike in that, she thought, and was sorry for him. They went into one of the new coffee bars that had begun to spring up all over London. It was empty and fiendishly noisy, a juke box in the corner clicked down its sad, metallic discs and the blue-jeaned pansy behind the counter looked as if he had been waiting for the sixpences to run out before he shut up shop. He brought their coffee with an insolent waggle of his buttocks and they sat, side by side, on a bench behind a flimsy trellis trailing a plant of sickly leaved ivy. Sebastian talked. He was writing a novel, a symbolic novel with a new gimmick: it was to be written entirely in clichés. He made it sound dull and pretentious on a vast scale, a kind of stern, Homeric silliness. 'Of course it won't do well,' he said. 'Serious books never do. The pen is no longer mightier than the sword.' He looked very young, his red hair standing up like a sweep's brush above his sandy, unhandsome face. 'Milton wouldn't have a chance, were he living at this hour. He'd have to be a television personality to make any

impression.' He gave her what he supposed was a savage grin.

'He'd probably be a wow on television,' Mary murmured. The heat, the music, and his terrible, insistent voice had begun to take effect: she kept awake with an effort. 'I must go,' she said.

They had finished their coffee. He moved along the bench and pressed his thigh against hers. 'Why don't you come back with me? I daresay the bastards will have left a dribble of gin.' She felt a distant echo of desire, a tired facsimile of reality. It would be easy, she thought, there would be the dregs of alcohol his guests had left behind, another cigarette and a few moments of fuddled sex on the ash-strewn carpet among the records and the tumbled piles of literary weeklies. But it wouldn't work, she thought, it wouldn't work. 'No,' she said. 'I like my sex with roses.'

He gave a puzzled uneasy laugh. She said, partly to cover up, partly because she was sorry for his spoiled party, 'It was true what I said about spending Saturday with my father. Only my son was taken ill. He nearly died. I was with him until late this afternoon.'

'I'm terribly sorry,' he said, stricken. He moved his leg away hastily.

She said quickly, 'Did Clara come?'

He pouted like a cross child. 'She was late. And she only stayed a short time. That was what ruined the party, really.'

Mary smiled, stifling a yawn. 'Clara was late because she was with me at the hospital. Anyway, you didn't expect her to stay long, did you? She doesn't like parties.'

'Oh—I knew that. One asks her simply because one has drunk so much of her gin.' He frowned sternly at the bowl of sugar on the table. 'The point was, she'd promised to bring a friend of hers, a man called Charles Franks. He's done some interesting stuff on international law—not that I give a damn about that, but I'd asked someone who wanted to meet him, the editor of my paper, actually. *He* only came because he

wanted to meet Franks. But Clara whipped him away before anyone had a proper chance to talk to him. I must say, it was pretty thoughtless of her, though one sees her point. She'd have lost him if they'd stayed much longer. He exudes sexual attraction—so I'm told, anyway. Most of the girls this evening would have fallen flat on their backs if he'd so much as glanced in their direction. . . .'

His voice droned on. Mary felt ill and cold. Of course he slept with lots of women, perhaps even with Clara. She saw them together, Clara abandoned on the bed—a ludicrous image, Clara with her middle-aged face and leggy, young girl's body. She drew in the details with a kind of savage greed, for the moment still rational, knowing that what she was doing was furtive and dirty, the frustrated woman's private, lustful dream.

Then reason was done for and she sweated and shivered as if she had a fever. Jealousy is an old emotion and has its store of clichés; her stomach contracted, she wanted to hurl herself on the floor, to scream, weep, tear her hair. She crouched forward over the table and began to cry helplessly.

From a long way off Sebastian said, 'I say, are you all right?' His voice grated with irritation. When she did not answer he said quickly, 'Look—hang on a minute. I'll get you a taxi.'

* * *

Charles said, 'Mary, are you all right?' He spoke more sharply than he had meant to. He was cold, he had been waiting a long time, alternately cursing Clara for her neurotic fears and himself for being swayed by them. When the taxi stopped and Mary got out he had felt first a huge relief and then simple annoyance: of course she had done exactly what he had told Clara she would do. She had stood herself a good dinner and got quietly drunk, alone. She looked drunk: her hair was mussed-up, her face had a pale, shiny, liquor look and her eyes were darker than the shadows beyond them. They

looked at him with blank alarm as if he were a stranger who had accosted her in the darkness.

He said more gently, 'I'm sorry if I frightened you. The front door was open, so I waited in the hall.'

Her lips moved stiffly. 'I thought you were with Clara.'

'I was. She was worried sick about you. So was I.' He felt a sharp flick of anger. 'Whatever possessed you to go off like that?'

She shook her head slowly, saying nothing, staring at him with large, dark eyes as if she were looking at a disaster. He thought she was like a small, trapped animal, huddling against the opposite wall in her brown, fur coat. 'It doesn't matter,' he said quickly. 'It doesn't matter at all.'

She bent her head and lowered her lids so that he couldn't see her eyes. Her look of utter exhaustion frightened him. 'Have you got your key?'

She held out her bag, he took it, found the key, unlocked the door. The stairs down to the basement were dark as a mine shaft. He switched on the light, ran down the stairs and flicked down every switch he could find until the flat blazed with light. When he came back, she was standing where he had left her. 'Come on,' he said, hand under her elbow. He gave her a little tug and her eyes snapped wide open at him. 'I'm coming in with you,' he said. 'I promised Clara I'd see you were all right.'

She made no protest and walked ahead of him, without stumbling, down the narrow stairs and into the drawing-room. It was like an old, stuffy hotel or a museum no one has bothered to visit for a long time. There was a smooth grey film over the polished furniture and a sour, sweet smell of dust, like stale cheese.

She stood in the middle of the room. Charles said, uneasy, but determined to go through with this, 'I'll make you some tea. Have you eaten?'

She made a small movement of her head that might have meant yes or no. He left her, a little uncertainly, and went into

the kitchen. Here, it was untidy, almost dirty. The stove was stickily encrusted with coffee grounds, the sink piled with dirty dishes. There was milk and butter in the refrigerator but there seemed to be no other food. He toasted some stale bread, made tea.

When he carried the tray back into the drawing-room, she was sitting neatly on the sofa in the way she always sat, straight backed, hands folded, still as a statue. She had taken off her fur coat and he saw she was wearing a suit of dark grey flannel that made her look as if she had come out of an orphanage. He thought it looked as if she had been sleeping in it, and then it came to him on a flood of pity that she had probably barely slept at all. He put the tray down beside her and she gave him a scared, chilly smile. He poured out the tea. 'Drink it up. Why did you take off your coat? It's like a tomb in here. You'll catch your death of cold.'

Her smile warmed up a little. She picked up the cup obediently and said quite easily, 'You sound like an old woman.'

'Never mind how I sound. Drink your tea.'

He turned to the grate. The fire was laid—paper and dry logs under a soft, black covering of soot. He lit it and the paper spurted blue flame. He was still busy with the fire when she said, 'I knew you were with Clara.'

He said absently, moving the logs delicately, 'There was some stupid party she wanted to go to. You know Clara. Apparently she'd promised and she likes to fulfil her social obligations if she can. She ought to learn discrimination, though. That was a terrible party.'

'Have you seen a lot of her?'

He turned round. Her face was white and her eyes had a question, or an appeal in them he couldn't fathom. 'We've seen each other from time to time.' He hesitated. 'She was the only person I could ask. I wanted to know how you were.'

'Did you?' She gave a shaky laugh. 'I thought you'd been making love to her.'

'What?' He stared at her.

'Of course not. It was stupid of me.' Her face unfroze suddenly and she began to cry, helplessly and miserably, not bothering to hide her face. For a moment he watched her, a confusion of impulses and emotions in his mind. Then he got up and went over to the sofa and took her hands. As soon as he touched her, she began to fight him, trying to twist her hands away, holding her head averted. He let go her hands and caught her shoulders. She pummelled his chest with clenched fists and when he only held her tighter, she jerked her head round sharply and refused to look at him. He laughed suddenly and shook her until she gasped; she shut her eyes and he twisted his fingers in her long hair until she opened them. They were bright and shining. 'Oh, my sweet, darling Mary,' he said, and kissed her neck.

17

MARY said, 'I love you. But you must get up. It's wicked to lie in bed on a Sunday morning. It's nearly lunch-time.'

Charles said sleepily, 'You're a very wicked woman.' He rolled over in the bed and watched her with pleasure, free for the moment from desire. She was standing naked by the window, one hand on the curtain, looking out at the sun streaming down into the area. With the other hand she scratched absentmindedly at the small of her back. 'I'd be ashamed, if I were you,' he said. 'You think of nothing but your stomach.'

'Do I?'

'Certainly. For the last half-hour you've talked of nothing else but bacon and eggs and coffee. It's disgraceful. The sin of gluttony. Besides, you'll get fat.'

She dropped the curtain and lifted her arms above her head,

fingers straight and pointed as if she were going to dive, turning and sucking in her stomach so that he could see the rise of her breasts and the rib cage curving down to the flat belly. 'Have I got fat?' She looked at him, half smiling, half serious.

'Fatter than you were. Plumply rounded. A nice, plump, spring chicken. Anyone can see what's happened to you.' He grinned contentedly. 'Satisfied women always put on weight.'

'Conceited pig,' she said dispassionately. She began to dress and he felt warmly domestic as she hooked, zipped and buttoned with complete absorption as if he wasn't lying there, watching her. He thought that she could get dressed in less time than any woman he had ever known. He sighed loudly. 'It's a pity.'

She twitched her skirt straight and picked up a brush for her hair. 'What is?'

'To put your clothes on. Come here.'

She advanced warily to the edge of the bed and stood, calculatingly, out of reach. 'Get up, lazy,' she said. 'You look indecent lying there. Showing off the hair on your chest.'

He lunged, surprising her, and caught her hand, dragging her down beside him. 'Just for a minute,' he promised. 'Then you can go and cook bacon or polony or anything else your soul craves. I only want spiritual nourishment.'

'Idiot.' She lay still, her head hidden in the curve of his shoulder. A puff of wind blew the curtain and extended the area of sunlight on the floor. Somewhere outside a brass band was faintly playing a march. 'It's the right music for us,' Charles said. 'It has the right touch of nostalgia. When you were a little girl, did you ever listen to military music in the park?'

'On Bank holidays. My father used to take me. We used to picnic on the grass.'

'That's what I meant. This is a picnic. A holiday. I wish it wasn't.'

She lifted herself on one elbow, her hair fell down and tickled his face. She said, 'We've been happy, haven't we?'

He smiled at her serious face. 'What do you think?'

She sighed, her breath warm on his skin. There were still two months, he thought, two months were endless; when you were happy, even two days could be an eternity. The brass band blared nearer and he remembered with an ache in his heart the sad end of every picnic, the empty ice-cream cartons, the empty bottles on the grass.

Suddenly, he felt the sharp whips of panic. He put his hands round her neck, his thumb felt the pulse in her throat. 'I want it to go on,' he said roughly. 'I want you to have my children.'

She did not move for a minute. Her lower lip was caught between her teeth, her eyes soft and shining. Then she detached his hands gently from her throat and stood up. She smiled at him as she brushed her hair, but her withdrawal was more than physical and it hurt him.

He said, 'All right. I shouldn't have said that. It's not in your book of rules, is it?'

She said nothing.

'You seem sometimes so complacent. It's a kind of lower middle-class complacency. You know what's right and what's wrong, don't you?'

She muttered, 'No, I don't.' She put the brush down on the dressing-table and frowned down at it. 'It's just that there's no point . . .'

'Most women enjoy tormenting themselves,' he said, deliberately forgetting that her restraint was one of the things that had astonished and delighted him from the beginning. He had expected the usual accompaniments to an affair with a married woman; the high-principled self-torture, the long self-justifications, the careful alignment of excuses served up, necessary as bread, with every meal. But she had never once used guilt as a weapon to modify their pleasure in each other and now, perversely, this made him suspicious and angry as if

she had intentionally hidden a part of herself away from him.

He said, 'Have you heard from Johnny?'

He watched her jealously, but she said quite simply, 'Last week.' She paused for a moment gazing thoughtfully at her reflection in the glass. 'He didn't say anything except that he was well and he hoped I was. It was like one of Martin's school letters.'

'I daresay that is a weekly duty that stamps out a prose style for life.'

She ignored the nervous irritation in his voice. 'I'd never thought of that. But it must be difficult for him. He didn't want me to visit him, you know.'

Charles thought she spoke as if they were discussing a common acquaintance they had not seen for a long time—it was precisely that kind of tone, thoughtful, but basically disinterested. He wondered if she had persuaded herself that there were degrees of infidelity and the worst was to talk your husband over with your lover. He realized suddenly that he had wanted to hear her say that she had been unhappy with Johnny, that one day she would leave him—if only to give himself the satisfaction of being angry with her. That was all it was—he wanted *her* to behave badly, so that *he* could behave well. For the moment, this discovery conquered his insecurity. She was right to hold on tight to the present, not to invite the future in, the guilt, the suspicion, like so many drab, unwelcome guests. He laughed and got out of bed. They stood, arms round each other. The sun shone warm on his back. She said, 'I'm so happy. Is it as obvious as you said?'

He smiled down at her. 'It was a joke, my baby.'

She leaned backwards against his clasped hands. 'Clara knows, I think. Oh—she's not said anything. It's the way she behaves. She always telephones before she comes here—even if she's close by, she telephones from the box on the corner. And when she does come, she's nervous.' She gave a low, warm giggle. 'As if she expected someone to be hiding in the wardrobe.'

'You've imagined it. She's the most unsuspecting person in the world. She was here yesterday, wasn't she?'

'She came to get some things for Martin. The schools close at the end of the week. She's taking him to the sea.'

'I thought she was going to do that later on.' He hesitated. 'When Johnny comes out. To make it easier in the beginning.'

She said quickly, 'The weather's so lovely just now.'

He thought her face was shadowed suddenly, and then that he must have imagined it because she closed her eyes and pressed against him, stroking his back, his buttocks, his thighs. He was excited but he wanted to tease her. 'So you don't want your breakfast after all? All right—ask nicely, like a good girl. Ask me to make love to you.'

She shook her head and hid her face, not coquettishly but with the queer shyness that had often surprised him when they made love. There was never any question but that she wanted it as badly as he did but she would never talk about it; he thought she was happiest when they made love silently, in the dark. He said, 'Why won't you ask me? Are you ashamed?'

'Yes.'

'Why? Come on—tell me.' He held her away from him, hands hard on her shoulders, not teasing now. She didn't try to hide or evade but looked at him with a serious, thoughtful expression like a conscientious student searching for the exact, right answer in an important examination. At last she said, 'I love you. I don't want you to think I love you because of sex—like a mouse having to eat cheese because it's caught in a trap. If we could never make love again, I would love you all my life.'

The simplicity—the absurd simplicity—and the sweet, almost childish amplitude of her answer, touched a deep spring of sentiment in him. He looked at her, at the tiny imperfections on her face, the mole at the corner of her left eye, the tiny scar on her chin. It was like a revelation of tenderness. He said, 'Sex isn't always the end of love. That's a romantic view. It can quite easily be the beginning.'

She smiled and he held her hard against him to stop her trembling. She caught his hand as he began to undo the buttons of her blouse. 'Charles—do other women—do they want this as much as I do? Am I different?'

'Don't you want to be?'

'No. Yes. I don't know. I meant . . .' He looked at her, surprised. Her eyes were serious and troubled. 'I mean—am I *normal*?'

Laughter seized him, made him more helpless than pain. She watched him solemnly for a moment, then her face quivered, dissolved with laughter. They clung together, staggering, like children weakened by some marvellous joke. Charles thought he had never been so free from tension or worry or fear. 'Oh my honey,' he said. 'Oh my lovely love.'

* * *

It was a good day. They went out to lunch and afterwards walked in the park. It was hot, but a breeze blew off the Serpentine when they stopped to watch the bathers. Charles felt very tranquil; he thought they had never been so close, so unreservedly happy as when they smiled at each other or when they half dozed on the grass and she touched his fingers gently to see if he was asleep.

When they got back to the flat, Mary went ahead to open the door and Charles stopped to pick up the pint of milk on the doorstep. The birds had pecked at the foil cap and the bottle was greasy with warm, dribbled milk. It slipped through his fingers and rolled off the step without breaking. 'Damn,' he said, and bent to pick it up.

Someone said, 'Does Mr. Prothero live here?'

Charles straightened up and saw a tall young man with fair, almost white hair darkened slightly with brilliantine. He wore a new, expensive-looking suit, a white silk tie with musical instruments painted on it and a blue shirt, the same pale, clear blue as his eyes.

Charles said, 'Yes, he does.' He was distantly puzzled by

the boy's voice and appearance. It was difficult to imagine what he could want with Johnny. 'He's away at the moment,' he said.

'I know he's been away. I reckoned he'd be back about now.'

Mary called, 'Darling, what on earth are you doing?' She was in the doorway, at the top of the steps. 'Look at you. Her voice was scolding, warm and domestic. 'You're getting milk all over your suit.'

The young man looked at her, then at Charles. The expression in his eyes was a curious blend of speculation and enmity. 'Sorry to trouble you,' he muttered, and turned on his heel.

'What a mess. Look at your trousers!' Mary took the milk from him with an exasperated clicking of her tongue. Her eyes shone with amusement at herself. 'Who was that?' she said.

'I've no idea. He wanted Johnny.'

'Oh.'

She turned her back and walked up the steps into the house, holding the bottle of milk carefully away from her full, green cotton skirt. Charles followed her. It struck him, briefly, that her 'oh' had had a startled edge to it and he saw that the skin of her neck, above her white blouse collar, had turned a bright shade of scarlet. But he was in a happy, incurious mood. He was only disturbed for a minute.

* * *

Charles had to go to Cambridge on Monday to dine at High Table and make various minor arrangements for the next term. He sent Mary a coloured picture postcard of his college and spent a great deal of time in a punt on the river, thinking about her.

Charles had always believed that however much people protested, they did, in the end, what they wanted. In his experience, this was especially true of women. He avoided the thought that Mary had not once protested, that she had never

even pretended their love affair was unique. The memory of the last week-end they had spent together and the pleasant, leisurely freedom of his four days in Cambridge, combined to produce in him the comfortable sureness that the situation would work out eventually in the way he wanted it to. He no longer doubted what he wanted—every part of her held him now—nor did he doubt that she wanted it too.

She did not love Johnny. The only things that prevented her leaving him were his predicament and a few, distant but categorical rumbles from her puritan conscience. The first would resolve itself eventually, the family would see to that, and the second was only the hangover from a narrow upbringing. And he could change that: there was plenty of time.

He marshalled his weapons—all the time-worn arguments all lovers use—in all good faith: her marriage was a sham, to act as if it wasn't would make her an escapist, a dodger. The sensible—the honest, thing, was to admit it and start again. It wouldn't be so difficult. Johnny was civilized, legal details were a minor matter and easily arranged; the boy would have things explained to him as gently as possible. There would be some pain and bitterness at first, but it would soon be over.

Over the last five years, success had changed Charles from a determined, but unsure young man, into a determined and confident one. The change had been so gradual that he had barely noticed it. He lay in his anchored punt on the river, watching the brown water, and drifting in a world of sugar candy.

* * *

When he got back to the flat in Barnes, her letter was waiting for him. He read it three times before he understood it completely. Johnny's sentence had been shortened and he was due to be released immediately. They would be going down to Fitchet for a while and then Lester wanted them to go abroad for a holiday.

. . . I know you will be angry with me for not telling you on Sunday. There is no excuse except the silly one that I couldn't bear to. . . .

That was the only personal reference, the only hint of emotion. There were no endearments. She said it was unlikely that they would meet again. Hope seized on this and then subsided. 'Unlikely' was colder than 'never' and therefore more subtly final. She had weighed her words carefully, she wanted to leave no loophole. She had made her own rules and intended to stick to them. He supposed that they had included avoiding a heavy renunciation scene.

He thought: the bitch, the scheming, careful little bitch. And then: this is what the end feels like. Normally he had never minded when things came to an end. He liked to look forward and an end was usually a beginning. With the closing of other love affairs, there had sometimes been a certain struggle but always a certain relief. Now he felt no relief at all, only a sad, painful anger, a flimsy protection against emptiness. He screwed up the letter and threw it into the ashtray.

18

WHEN Johnny came out of prison, Mary met him and drove him down to Fitchet. He spoke very little on the journey. She only remembered, afterwards, one remark that he made.

They had been to a pub for lunch and stopped for petrol about an hour later. When the tank was already filled, Mary discovered she had left her handbag behind in the pub. Johnny had paid for their drinks, he turned out his pockets now and could only produce two half-crowns and a few half-pennies. He explained to the garage proprietor, speaking

with a new, terrible diffidence: it would never have occurred to him before that some people might play this game deliberately. The man glanced at him casually and said, 'That's all right, sir. Send me a cheque when you get home, will you?'

Johnny went white. He thanked the man, wrote down the address and said, as the car swung back onto the road, 'Do I still look so obscenely honest, then?'

* * *

When they got to Fitchet, no one was there except the Swedish foreign help. Florence Prothero was with Clara and Martin in Cornwall. Mary said, 'Lester thought it might be a good idea to give you a chance to breathe. He's spending a couple of nights in town.'

He showed nothing, not even relief at Lester's tact. They sat in the library, drinking gin, and he fell asleep in his chair. He made no objection when she woke him up and suggested he might like to go to bed. She took him up to the room he had always occupied as a boy. That had been Lester's idea. Mary said nervously, 'We thought you might like it. Say if you don't.'

'I do like it.' He sat on the bed and looked at her with shy, bright eyes. 'I'm sorry. It seems awful. You've been so kind. I'm ashamed.'

'I'm not kind. And you don't have to be ashamed because you want to be alone.' She remembered what Lester had said and repeated it. 'You want to be alone for a bit. It's the only way to recover.'

She left him to get into bed and came back with his supper on a tray. He smiled at her with transparent effort and said, 'It's good to be home.'

It came out quite naturally. It was a thing he deeply felt. But as soon as he had spoken he frowned, afraid he had been tactless. His home—their home—was in the basement flat in London. She wanted to reassure him that it didn't matter but

that seemed more cruel than pretending to be hurt. She made a mock-rueful face but he was too spent to do more than continue to smile apologetically.

'Would you like me to go?' she asked. He seemed to hesitate and she said, 'Get one thing clear, will you? I want to do what you want most. I'm not going to be hurt.'

'Right,' he said. 'Point taken.' He smiled with a return of his old brightness. 'Stay—if you don't mind.'

She sat with him while he ate his supper. He asked her if she had heard from Julian.

'Clara has. He writes to her.' She paused, wondering whether to tell him this. 'He sent her a cheque for me on a bank in Switzerland. For two hundred and fifty pounds. I've still got it—I didn't know what to do with it.'

'Does it matter? He owed me more than that, after all.' He pushed the tray away and lay back on the pillows. 'I expected that he would write to me.'

'What? An apology?'

'Not exactly.' He looked at her, half puzzled by himself. 'I can't believe it was really his fault. I thought he would explain. Julian isn't proud. When we were boys, if we quarrelled he was always the first to make it up.' He turned his head away from her. 'I can't believe it. If I have to, it can't be until I've seen him again.'

'I don't think you will. I can't imagine, really, that you'd want to.'

'He's my friend,' he said, as if this was the answer to everything.

'Oh—don't be so *trite*,' she said, angry because his bewilderment was painful to her. She had guessed that he had not really blamed Julian, but she had not thought he could be so naïve. She got up and walked restlessly about the room. The top of the bookcase held engraved silver cups and the walls were lined with photographs. Johnny, sitting with crossed arms in the Prefect's rank, Frederick, plump and round-eyed as a little owl. Johnny and Julian in the First

Fifteen. Young, immature faces as basic as a child's first drawing. Innocence and goodness as fresh as spring and sentimental as an old tune. She said, 'It's hard when people let you down. Particularly if you love them. But you have to know that it happens. It needn't make you bitter, but it isn't sensible, not to acknowledge it. People aren't gods, coming down in golden showers.'

'I let *you* down,' he said. 'That's the thing I hate. And it was just stupid, bloody pride. I couldn't admit I'd been made a fool of.'

'Don't,' she said quickly. She felt a livelier sense of shame than she had felt before and then, looking at him, a wild upsurge of hope. He was a brave man but in recent years his courage had been a force that slept: he had not learned how to adapt it to humdrum purposes. But he could learn now, perhaps adversity would teach him. His strength was of a kind that would show itself more clearly in a defeated position than in any other—the response of the back to the wall, the last stand. She sat down on the bed and took his hand.

'The worst's over now, isn't it?' she said. 'It'll take time to recover, but you've got time. Not only time, but so many other things. You mustn't waste them. Everyone will help but you'll have to do it yourself in the end. It won't be easy but you can do it. With luck—just normal luck, you can build everything up again.' She stopped. She thought that it had sounded like a sermon, long-rehearsed.

He said stiffly, 'Thank you for being kind. But my life's at a standstill.'

'No. Listen. . . .'

His hand remained limply in hers but he turned his head away. 'Don't pity me.'

She knew that her presence humiliated him. 'I'm sorry. I don't pity you. I love you.'

His mouth almost smiled, there was an ironic glint in his eyes. 'And you'll make something of me yet, is that it?'

She saw how he had changed in the last months. His con-

fidence was gone but his face was more sensitive, more wary—in an odd way, more human. She thought: no one is quite human until they've found in themselves a bit of the weakness and the shabbiness they have despised in other people. She felt she had discovered something important.

She said, 'I don't want to make something of you. But I think you've got a better chance now. You always expected too much of people, too much of yourself. Now you know most people are weak, that even you can be weak sometimes. Don't you see, you've lost a handicap? Oh—I know I'm putting it badly. . . .'

He gave a short bark of laughter. 'Mary, you're a marvel. You've learned your homework nicely, haven't you? Seven months in prison have matured me. I know I'm weak but so is the next man—we clasp hands in frail humanity. Thanks. I'd a thousand times rather believe the old thing—that you can't touch pitch and not be defiled.'

She felt ashamed and miserable. All the things she had meant to say, the things she had worked out so carefully, seemed silly and childish. She said, trying not to cry with deep disappointment in herself, 'You're too fastidious.'

'Can you be?' He lay back against the pillows, his face suddenly very pale and bony. 'Dear Mary,' he said affectionately, 'you've been wonderful. I mean it. But just now—I can't take too much splendid, remorseless energy. I think it's marvellous, it makes the world go round, but not everyone can pick themselves up and go on so easily. . . .'

He smiled at her, his eyes drifting as a child's do when sleep is irresistible. She turned out all the lights but one and sat beside him while he went to sleep, in the dim room with its trophies, the oar above the bookcase, the team photographs, the miniature chest of drawers where Johnny kept his father's and his grandfather's war medals—the room that seemed suddenly like a shrine in memory of some golden, Edwardian afternoon. She was tired, her head ached, there was a sharp, metallic taste in her mouth and the walls of the

room seemed actually to be moving inwards, dark and confining as a prison cell.

* * *

Except that Fitchet was emptier than it had been when he was a boy, Johnny must have found it almost unchanged. Lester stayed in his club during the week, the Swedish girl cooked the meals and two dailies came in from the village. He didn't protest when Mary told him, nervously, that she would like to keep on her job. She commuted, getting up at six-thirty in the morning and getting back at eight in the evening. A week after Johnny came home, she was moved to a larger magazine in the same firm and given a job as editorial assistant. Johnny had shown no interest in what she was doing and she did not mention her small success to him, afraid that he might see it as a reproach.

She worried in case he was lonely, but he didn't seem to be. He went to bed early, sleeping soundly as a boy, and got up late in the morning. He read the newspapers until lunch-time and then wandered round the house and garden looking for something to do. He spent two days helping the carpenter from the village cut out the worm-eaten wood from the rafters in the roof, dragging the rotten timber into a corner of the kitchen garden and making a bonfire of it. He borrowed the man's tools while he was away at lunch and did a few jobs about the house which the carpenter said were as good as he could have done himself.

Once or twice he asked Mary when Martin was coming home, but it was as if he were inquiring after a cousin or a young nephew in whom his interest was friendly but peripheral. At first this hurt her and then she saw that a curtain had fallen: he was living at Fitchet much as he had always done, almost as if nothing had happened between the long school holidays and now. He didn't miss Martin, he didn't miss her when she was in London; a lot of the time he was alone, he said, he felt simply lethargic and went to sleep in his chair.

He was asleep one Friday evening when Frederick telephoned. He had not seen Johnny since he came out of prison and Mary had only seen him once. She had told him then that Johnny wanted to see no one and he had understood too quickly; his hurt had shown in the way his forehead coloured, red weals above his sandy eyebrows.

'Mary, I've got a young man here. Len Oakes.' He spoke confidently as if the name should mean something to her.

'Who is he?'

'You don't know?' He sounded surprised. A protégé of sorts. Johnny asked me to keep an eye on him, do something for him if I could. They were in prison together, for part of the time, anyway.'

The immediate image was unwelcome. 'What does he want?'

'To see Johnny. I wondered . . .

'No, Fred.' She felt a rush of resentful hostility. Like many humble, undemanding men, Frederick thought nothing of making monstrous requests on behalf of other people. 'I'm sorry,' she said coldly, 'but it's out of the question. Do you think he wants to be reminded?'

He said diffidently, 'The circumstances are exceptional. He's an intelligent boy. Otherwise I wouldn't suggest . . .' His voice trailed away and then returned firmly, strengthened by dedicated conviction. 'He has a lot of admiration for Johnny, it would help him if he could see him. He seems so anxious to. I've managed to get him a job, he's a lorry driver, but his background is difficult. The important thing, you see, is to find someone, not a professional, to take a real interest . . .'

She said, 'Don't preach at me, Fred. I'm sure he needs help. But not from Johnny. Do you think, anyway, that Johnny would be the right kind of guide?'

That was incautious. He returned enthusiastically, 'Oh, *absolutely*. The point with Oakes is that he's proud. He'd take things from Johnny that he'd never take from someone who'd no idea—who'd never been in the same *fix*. D'you see?' He

gave a disarming ripple of laughter. 'It might do Johnny good, too.'

'Helping others we help ourselves,' she said. 'That's on the poster outside the local Methodist church. Thought for the Week.' She wondered why she always had to tease Frederick. Was it shame? Or envy?

He said levelly, 'Sometimes it's true, Mary. Johnny took a great interest in the boy. He wrote to me about him twice.'

She felt a queer twinge of apprehension. 'No, Fred,' she said firmly. 'It's quite impossible.'

* * *

Len Oakes turned up on Sunday morning after breakfast. Lester had gone to play golf. Mary saw him from the window of her room and recognized him at once, a slender, beautiful boy with hair like a white silk cap. He wasn't wearing his expensive suit but his bush shirt looked new and his jeans fitted him like skin. He walked slowly up the drive, hands thrust deep into his front pockets, blue, hostile eyes scanning the windows of the house. She moved back, out of sight, and saw Johnny come out of the door and go up to him. They strolled across the lawn, Johnny's hand on the boy's shoulder. Once Oakes glanced backwards at the house, laughing. From where Mary stood, he looked like a schoolboy who was good at games and at a peak of health; his body was slender but robust. After a little, Johnny left him and ran back into the house. It was the first time Mary had seen him run for months. Left alone, the boy walked along the drive, kicking a stone and whistling.

Johnny's face was bright, his eyes alerted with excitement. He was not in the least constrained; as he told her about Oakes, his voice betrayed only an unexpected joy. Mary was nervous, not just on her own behalf but on Johnny's. She remembered the boy's face when he had looked at her, outside her flat, his insolent beauty, his cool, hard gaze. She could not believe that Johnny could help him in the way Frederick

intended: she thought he had looked like someone who is activated only by the simplest kind of self-interest.

Johnny talked of him with an odd kind of pride, almost, she thought, as if there was a kind of glamour in Oakes's history. He had been born, in Brixton, to a tobacconist's daughter, nine months after a night out with an unknown, celebrating seaman. Mother and son had lived together in an atmosphere that was a curious blend of poverty and shiftless luxury. Oakes had told Johnny that he had never tasted margarine even during the war, or the cheaper cuts of meat. He had never been to school but he had been taught boxing and judo and at one time he and his mother had studied yoga together. She had also taught him to steal purses out of women's shopping baskets when he was still in his perambulator.

What emerged in the space of ten minutes, was an unpleasant picture of a combination of physical strength and soft-mindedness. Mary could not understand how Johnny had been taken in, as he clearly was. He radiated sympathy, and all the time he talked his eyes were serious and fascinated.

She said, 'What does he want? Does he think you have money?'

He frowned. 'Does that matter? He's got good stuff in him—I'd like to think I could give him a hand.' He stopped and added slowly, 'In a way, you see, I *owe* it to him. There is so much more excuse for him than there is for me.'

She thought: it's not like that at all. He's been used, all his life, to the idea that his friends will admire him, look up to him. Only this sort of boy could admire him now. She felt sorry for him and a deep, undefined fear. She said, 'What do you think you can do?'

'I don't know yet. I shall have to see. He seems to trust me. He's got a job because I suggested it—I sent him to Fred, did I tell you? I thought he'd know the form. It's the first job he's ever had. But he needs backing up—you see, his mother says he's a fool to work. Perhaps I can't do anything. At least I can take him out to lunch. We'll go to the pub.'

'What shall I say to Lester?'

He grinned, glowing with well-being. 'Tell him Oakes is an old school friend.'

* * *

'Now we've got the chance,' Lester said. 'I'd like to have a word with you about Johnny.' They had been walking in the garden and he had spoken suddenly, sighting a blackbird along his walking stick.

'Yes?' She felt reluctant. She did not dislike Lester any more and was grateful for his kindness, but she no longer had much confidence in his judgement. She had once thought of him as a buccaneer; now this description seemed to present too rumbustious, too turbulent a picture, a false hint of romantic readiness. Lester was a steady man, she had decided, whose steady achievement was of a rather low-grade kind and entirely bought: without money or background he might have been a reliable foreman or a trusted mechanic. It irritated her that he did not seem to comprehend his limitations. He was still quite sure that he lived at the warm, comfortable centre of the world.

'I've been thinking about Johnny for a long time. . . .' He mumbled on but she barely listened until he said, 'I've not been fair to him. Jealousy is a dreadful thing.'

She heard him with astonishment. He had astonished himself, his small eyes were desperately shy. He burst out explosively, 'Father loved him so,' and then fell silent, swishing at some nettles growing at the side of a flower bed.

Mary said uncomfortably, 'I know that.'

'Yes, of course you do.' He stared at her vaguely. 'My mother was a large, dull woman with big feet.'

She half smiled and then saw he had not meant to be funny: he had spoken with chilly, vicious precision. 'Father married her because the family fortunes were down the drain. Her father made office furniture. She bored him. I bored him because I was her son. My son bored him because he looked

like her. He hated the fact that he was condemned to live with a lot of oafish bores.' He leaned on his stick and said heavily, 'It's a handicap, to know your father despises you. I always got bad reports at school and I couldn't run.'

He spoke simply, a fat, elderly man, stripped suddenly naked by the memory of bad reports and slowness at games. He said, 'I'm not trying to excuse myself. Just explaining the situation, don't y'know?'

She nodded, moved almost to tears by the simplicity and completeness of what he had said. He went on swishing at the nettles.

'Father envied other men their sons. Johnny was what he always wanted—he made him, like God, in his own image. I suppose I hated him. Johnny, I mean. Ridiculous, to hate a boy, but he was so . . . so damned . . . beautiful. Light and strong. I used to watch my father watching him and see the *lust* in his eyes.'

He glanced at Mary, saw the shock in her face and said quickly, 'Oh—not physical, he just loved beauty. D'you know, my wife took me to Greece on our honeymoon and I couldn't stand it. All those bloody statues. It wasn't just their bodies, but the other things they stood for.' His voice rose and he made a clumsy, groping movement with his hand as if to drag words out of the air. 'All those virtues. Good, honest, brave. He got his ribbons—Lord, how the old man crowed.' He turned to Mary, his face beaded with sweat. 'D'you know something? When Johnny got caught out, I *loved him*. For not being so damn perfect after all.'

He stood trembling, at a pitch of intensity she would have thought inconceivable a few short minutes before. Then, visibly, he changed. He became abysmally embarrassed. His eyes glanced off her with dazed unhappiness and he tried a short laugh. 'I'm most damnably sorry,' he said. 'That was a disgraceful exhibition. Do me a favour, forget it, will you?'

She tried to reassure him, gabbling excitedly. She thought: dammit—to use his phrase—for the first time she really

liked him. But his inherited reactions were too firmly set. Intimate revelations were shameful, she could have talked till doomsday and not convinced him that she was neither embarrassed nor horrified. He took her arm, gripping it above the elbow, so anxious to leave the scene of his humiliation that they were almost running by the time they reached the house.

He released her arm in the library and poured brandy for them both in enormous goblets. It restored him. He had passed through two stages, the cathartic outburst and the appalled embarrassment. Now he became the brisk, practical man. He tucked his thumbs into his waistcoat and fired out sentences in sharp, military bursts. He had been thinking. He wanted Mary's opinion. Before the war, Johnny had wanted to be an engineer. Did she know? Just a boy's phase, of course. Always messing about with cars and tractor engines. Even spent some of his holidays helping at the garage in the village. Of course his grandfather would never have considered it. Engineering wasn't a suitable profession. But things were different now. He'd been talking to a man he knew who was in oil. They wanted representatives in Australia and New Guinea. Not salesmen, men with technical qualifications who could check on the installations and mix socially. There was a shortened two-year course for recruits at one of the northern universities and then an assignment. Johnny was a bit over the age limit but that could be fixed. Prospects were good. What did she think?

His eyes, wandering nervously round the room, came to rest on her with shy inquiry. 'I haven't said anything to Johnny. I don't want him to think I'm pushing him around.'

'No.' She was surprised and confused. 'How settled is it?'

'Johnny's only got to say the word. I once did this chap a good turn.'

'Does he know about Johnny?'

'Yes. It won't go any further.' He stood up, clearly uneasy,

and glanced towards the window as if invisible and disturbing things were taking place outside.

'It's awfully kind of you.'

'Forget it,' he said with rough impatience. He was completely in control of himself again, secure behind the fortress of his high, polished forehead, his shameful feelings stuffed away like soiled linen, out of the public eye. She had preferred him when he had been pitiable and inadequate in the garden—perhaps everyone loves failure, she thought suddenly. You can't love success, you can only fear or envy it: she had felt she could love Lester when he showed her his weakness as he had said he loved Johnny now. Thinking like that made her ashamed. She said, 'I don't want to forget it, Lester. Should one forget kindness?'

His embarrassment revived. He glowered and stroked his chin. He didn't answer her question but said abruptly, 'Will you talk to him? He'll listen to you.'

'Yes, if you like.'

She was aware of a growing, inner excitement. It might work—a completely new life, a blank page. Lester went to his study to write letters, he said, but actually to snooze. She passed by the window a little later and saw him, snoring cosily in his chair, a copy of the latest military memoirs open on his knee.

* * *

Later that afternoon, the August sky darkened, rain blew from the sea. The storm was rattling the windows when Johnny came back. She was lighting a small, summer fire in the drawing-room and he came in quietly and closed the door. She thought he looked at her warily and felt a tightening in her throat.

She said, 'Hallo. Are you wet?'

'No. I took the car.'

'It's coming down cats and dogs.'

'Yes. It was pretty sudden.'

He came slowly towards her. Mary said, 'These logs are hellishly damp.' She prodded them with her foot and they spluttered green and blue.

'That's not the way.' He crouched on his haunches with the tongs, balancing the logs expertly. When he straightened up he looked subdued and a little tired. He yawned slightly, lit a cigarette. The room was dark and she looked at his face in the uncertain firelight. The lines didn't show, only the fine bones and the queer, arched shape of his eyes.

She said, 'Did you have a good lunch?'

'Not bad.'

There was a silence. She said, 'I think I must have seen Oakes before. He came to the flat one Sunday, looking for you.'

'He told me.'

She understood from the disdainful expression on his face exactly what Oakes had said. 'What did he say?'

'Does it matter? I daresay he's a liar, as well as everything else.'

She had a sudden, hysterical desire to dispense with this stilted skirmishing. 'He was telling the truth. I was with a man. I suppose he drew the obvious conclusion. That was true as well.'

There was another silence. Then he said, 'I wish he hadn't told me. It was none of his business.' He looked at her steadily. 'Nor of mine, either.'

It was a magnanimous attitude, she thought, but one that might be difficult to hold for too long, like an unnatural pose for an old-fashioned photographer.

She said, 'It ~~is~~ your business. Going to prison doesn't deprive you of the right to be angry if your wife lets you down.'

'It's not that,' he said, and added with awful honesty, 'I meant it was none of my business because I've been such a failure to you sexually.'

It sounded very queer. She said, 'It wasn't your fault.' It struck her, bleakly, that it was funny that they should be so

eagerly arguing each other's cause. Almost funny, anyway. The thought that drained the humour from the situation was that selfless detachment can so often cover up a coldness in the heart. 'Anyway, it doesn't matter,' she said. 'Or shouldn't matter. That side of things is luck. There's no escape clause in the contract.'

He smiled at her out of a vast apathy. Then he said, slowly, 'I've no right to ask you—believe me—I mean that, but was it just a chance thing? Or are you in love with someone?' That 'someone', instead of 'someone else', tolled his acceptance of defeat.

'I was.'

'Are you still?'

'I suppose so.' A cold self-loathing twisted inside her. 'But it's over now.'

He turned, resting his arm on the overmantel and his head on his arm, staring into the fire. After a while, he said, 'It doesn't have to be.' He glanced sideways at her. 'Is he a gentleman?'

The colossal absurdity of the question shocked her. It was as if they were moving, not in the real world, but among the jerky heroics of some old silent film. She laughed hysterically, her hand to her mouth.

He whipped round to face her, his eyes glittering with anger. 'I meant—would he marry you?'

She saw her chance, spread out and shining like the cities of the plain. Other women left their husbands and married other men and paid no penalty for it. Why should she be so squeamish? Not to do what you wanted could be virtue, it could also be a kind of masochistic pride. Johnny would divorce her if she wished, in fact he would certainly insist that she divorced him. It would be done discreetly, with as much decency as possible. Then she saw that there wasn't really a choice. She thought: there seldom is, there is just the thing you can do and the thing you can't do.

He said, 'No one would blame you.'

'I'm five years too old to think that matters.'

He said bitterly, '*I* wouldn't blame you.'

'Do you want me to go?'

'No.'

'Then I want to stay.'

He sat on the floor beside her chair. She put out a tentative hand and touched the side of his face.

'I ought to hate you,' he said. 'I ought to be jealous. I should want to hit you, to drag you round the floor by your hair.' He turned to look at her with a face like stone. 'Isn't that how a lover should feel?'

'Don't.'

'Isn't it? Isn't it how your lover will feel if you go to bed with another man?'

She said, in agony, 'It isn't the important thing. It comes to an end. Sex doesn't last. . . .'

'But love does,' he finished ironically. 'Would you buy me off as cheaply as that? What does it mean?' His eyes narrowed, hard as amber. 'I learned something this afternoon. That boy . . . Oakes . . . is in love with me.' The blood had drained from his cheeks. He said in a steady voice, 'I feel so disgusted that I would like to die.'

Mary thought: Oh God, couldn't they have spared him this? She said, 'How did you know? Did you guess—or did he tell you?'

'Oh—it wasn't too openly offensive. He wasn't soliciting. It was just that he seemed to expect . . . ' He broke off, his eyes searching her face. 'Have you ever thought there might be something wrong with me?'

'Of course there's nothing wrong with you,' she said, and knew that whatever the truth was, it was impossible to say anything else. He was so utterly innocent: if a thing was unthinkable, he would never think it. For so much of his life he had aroused so much love that he had never realized love had so many different faces. His friendships sprang from a long and good tradition of trust and loyalty and out of a deep,

sweet sentimentality, incorruptible in its simplicity. But she saw that he was corrupted now with the final corruption of knowledge. His face betrayed his thought: how often has this happened before, how many other relationships have been dirtied in this way? It was as if he had suddenly been brought face to face with carnage, like a general looking back on a massacre.

She said, 'It's not wrong to love your friends.'

He said painfully, 'It's not all. I suppose I'm a fool to be shocked. A blind, stupid fool. When I was in prison he—Len—was friendly with another man.' His colour darkened but he still looked at her. 'I was *jealous*.'

She thought she had never in all her life felt so useless. 'It's just one thing, isn't it? It's not all. Can't—can't the whole of life be different from the parts of it?'

'I can't accept that. You can't just forget a thing.'

He couldn't, of course. One blot on the page cancelled out a thousand credits. 'I'm ashamed,' he said.

'Don't be. Please don't be.' She said desperately, 'Listen—no one is perfect. Why should you expect to be? Isn't it just a kind of pride? You can't expect to go through life—untarnished—like a knight in some stupid old story.'

He glanced at her from the gold corners of his eyes. 'I can't lie to myself and call it honour.'

He spoke quietly and flatly but his face was livelier. If he could say something like that, she thought with a flash of amusement, the worst patch was over. She could think of nothing now except to tell him what Lester had suggested. She was nervous at first but grew more assured as her natural hopefulness asserted itself; she began to recover the feeling that life was still expanding, holding out unseen promises that could easily be bright. He listened to her without any vital awakening of excitement, but with enough interest to make the prospect viable.

He said, 'Of course, if that's what you would like,' but he was being cautious, not grudging. His enthusiasm was

stirring, confined only by his physical tiredness. He was perfectly willing to talk it over with Lester who was bluff, rather awkward, at dinner, and gave them both more than they wanted to drink.

Before he went to bed, he said, 'Some of the chaps in my squadron went out to Australia. I heard from one of them about a year ago—a very decent chap called Duffy Jones. When we get back to the flat, I'll look out his letter.'

19

THE next morning they went to town with Lester, breakfasting on the train. The sun shone, moted, through the greasy windows and the coffee spurted erratically out of the pot. The country was full of wind and sun and ripening corn.

Mary had been persuaded to take the morning off and was subdued by some conscientious worry and a slight resentment: neither Johnny nor Lester appeared to think her job of any importance. Johnny was clear-eyed and cheerful as if the journey were taking him further than a London main line station, into a new world of expanding, even romantic possibilities. Any reservations he may have had the evening before had comfortably receded. Action, even of a rather limited kind, always acted on him as a stimulant. Nothing could be arranged about his appointment today; Lester's contact was in New York at a business conference, but they had decided to get rid of the flat and Johnny was going to see an estate agent. The house was Clara's now but the lease of the flat, since Christine had intended Johnny should live there rent free, was presumably at his disposal. In Lester's opinion, it should fetch some four or five thousand pounds. Mary thought this a large and quite unexpected sum of money but to Lester

and Johnny it apparently seemed nothing out of the way and was, in fact, barely distinguishable from poverty. Johnny's income, during his apprenticeship, would not be large and they would have to find accommodation in a university town.

'Australia is expensive too,' Lester said. 'I believe there are company houses, but one imagines you would want something a little better.'

His emphatic tones depressed Mary. Nothing very new was happening after all. Johnny would naturally carry a certain amount of vested privilege into the new world.

She said, 'But it's Clara's money, really. Naturally Christine didn't want us to pay rent to her. But that isn't the same thing as selling the flat and pocketing the money, is it?'

'But of course, Clara wouldn't hear of anything else,' Lester said, surprised. He smiled at Mary benevolently. 'My dear girl, don't worry. Clara has enough. She's not exactly a wildly extravagant girl.'

'I'm not just concerned with her,' Mary said stubbornly. She realized that she hated talking about money to Lester, partly because he had been so generous and partly because, on this occasion, her objections were in the region of superstition rather than reason.

'I think we ought to start from scratch,' she said. 'A clean break. . . .'

Their raised eyebrows, Johnny's amused, and Lester's simply uncomprehending, angered her. She said, 'Don't you see—everything—all this dreadful mess and muddle has happened because, in a way, we've been hanging on to a sinking ship.' She hesitated, not quite sure how to put it, not even sure what she wanted to say, but feeling that she was groping uncertainly after the hub of the matter. She said pleadingly, 'If he takes this money, he'll take a lot of other things with it. Isn't the best thing just to leave everything—jump overboard and swim for the shore?'

It was a mistake to get carried away by a picturesque image.

Johnny laughed at her. 'Aren't you being rather sentimental? Money isn't a symbol of anything.'

Lester thought he understood her better. 'Hair shirts aren't necessary, Mary,' he said, and lit a cigar. His gaze flickered over her flushed face with restless indifference and his voice was cold. She saw he had no intention of arguing with her. He was doing his best for Johnny and would enter dutifully into any discussion of practical arrangements but there his interest ended. Perhaps at the back of his mind was the thought that he would soon not only be rid of Johnny, but also of Johnny's wife—rid of her boring, suburban squeamishness for ever.

He would only have one regret. He talked about Australia for the rest of the journey with the enthusiasm of someone who is not ever likely to go there; the weather was wonderful, the people were marvellously friendly, Johnny would be able to keep up his tennis. He laid these attractions before them like a bribe of sweets. The careful benevolence of his attitude cracked only once. As the train drew into the station he looked out of the window and said, 'Of course—we shall miss the boy.'

* * *

The flat had a sour, unkempt smell and the sun shining through the windows made everything look dirty. Mary started to clean up a little and grew discouraged. She collected a couple of suitcases and began, slowly, to pack her things. There was less personal stuff than she had expected. She packed photographs of Martin and some of his remaining toys, but the clothes in his cupboard were outgrown. She found paper and string and made them into a parcel and then wondered what to do with it. A little later, she came across a pile of Charles's vintage jazz records stuffed away under some dirty linen in a corner. He had brought them round one evening to play to her and forgotten them. Some of them were in a case but others were loose and one or two had been broken.

She moved them onto a bed where they would be safer, though she was aware of a deep, shrinking unwillingness to accept responsibility for them. After a while, she put them into a spare suitcase and kicked it under the bed with a sudden, sharp anger. It was hateful to be reminded of anything except the one thing she wanted to remember, her body's pleasure; the memory of a cheap, animal satisfaction that could be divorced from everything else, from kindness and gentleness and silly, loving laughter, and used to bank up the fire of her self-hatred and bitter scorn.

* * *

Johnny came in suddenly and stood at the door of the bedroom.

He said, 'It's a mess, isn't it?' Though he spoke brightly, his eyes roamed with an almost affected sadness as though he felt he should be grieving for something. She tried to imagine how he must be feeling. 'You shouldn't have come,' she said. 'There's nothing much to do, really.'

'Don't try to spare me things,' he said with perfect good humour. 'Hadn't we better get a woman in to smarten things up a bit? We want to impress prospective customers.'

'I suppose so. Or I could come back this evening. I'll have to go to the office after lunch.'

'Do you have to? As things are, wouldn't it be more sensible to pack it in now? If we're moving away from London, is there any point in carrying on?'

'Eight pounds a week worth of point,' she said obstinately.

'That won't buy much gin.'

She saw this was a remark in self-defence. 'Perhaps not. She smiled at him. 'How did you get on?'

'I went to Harrods.' He went into details with a brisk self-confidence. Selling property was a straightforward, gentlemanly business, as long as it was your own. 'They think there shouldn't be much delay. It's a good address.'

'Desirable home for exiled foreign nobility?'

He grinned briefly but his voice was serious. 'I think we can afford to hold out for a good price. I left them my key.

'How did you get in, then?'

'You left the door on the latch.' He paused. 'I wasn't going to come. Then I remembered the gun. It can't stay here. Might give some elderly dowager a fright.'

He dragged a gimcrack gilt chair over to the wall and climbed up, feeling in the dark, old-fashioned air vent where he had hidden it. It was a Mauser, a small, nasty little weapon that should have been handed over to the police years ago. Mary had never understood why Johnny had kept it and had always been nervous, not only because she was afraid Martin would find it but because she thought of guns as alien and frightening. She had always hated the shotguns at Fitchet, kept in a glass-fronted case in the library.

Johnny jumped down from the chair, holding the gun wrapped in an oily rag. He undid it carefully and peered into the barrel. 'It's probably got damp,' he said.

'Don't play with it. It might go off.'

'Don't be a blithering ass.' He held it to his temple, laughing. 'Russian roulette?'

'Don't.'

'All right.' He fondled it lovingly, his eyes teasing her. 'I suppose I ought to dismantle it and chuck the pieces over a cliff or something. It's hardly the sort of thing for an emigrant to take in his luggage.'

'No.'

He sighed regretfully. 'It seems a pity. It's a pretty little thing.'

'I wouldn't say so. *Do* put it away.'

'Sorry. I'm being foul. I know you hate the things.' He put it on the bed and smiled affectionately at her. 'How far have you got?'

'Nearly finished. There wasn't much, really. Only a few of my clothes and Martin's. I took all your things down to Fitchet. What will you do with the furniture?'

'Harrods think we should leave it here until we've made a sale. Then we can use some of it, I suppose? I daresay some of the pieces can be sold. Or do they belong to Clara? I don't know. . . .' He wandered round the room, glancing at the pictures. 'There are one or two things that I'd like to keep. A couple of the Sickert drawings, anyway. And the Birkett Foster. Grandfather gave it to me when I was about Martin's age. What do you think?'

'I don't know.' The purposeful gusto that enlivened him suddenly wearied her. 'I don't care really,' she said honestly. 'You decide.'

He looked surprised, faintly hurt. 'All right then. But not now. You look tired.' He was suddenly gentle. 'Finish the packing and we'll have an early lunch. Then you can go back to your office if you're so keen to.' He looked at the folded clothes on the bed. 'Do you want another suitcase?'

He bent down and dragged the case out from under the bed.

'Not that one,' she said quickly. 'It's got records in it.'

'Rum place to keep records,' he said mildly. 'Shouldn't there be another case under the stairs?'

'I'll get it,' she said. She felt stupidly confused. She went out of the bedroom into the drawing-room. The door to the tiny hall and the stairs that led up to the ground floor was open and the main street door must be open too, she thought, because she could hear the rumble of traffic. And someone was coming down the stairs.

* * *

It was Charles. He stood in the doorway, rather pale, smiling, his eyes warily uncertain of his welcome but brimming over with light.

'I rang your office,' he said. 'I'm in town for the day. They said you were here.'

She stood staring at him; he felt nervous in a way he had not felt for a long time. 'Darling,' he said quickly, and held

out his hand. Then he looked up, over her shoulder, and saw Johnny standing behind her.

Mary said stiffly, 'I've just found your records. It's lucky you came, in another ten minutes we'd have been gone.'

Ten minutes later, she thought, and the door would have been shut and Charles would have gone on to his lecture or his exhibition or to meet his new girl—to do whatever it was he did now, in the life he lived apart from her.

'I'll get them,' she said. Her mouth felt harsh and dry.

'Records?' Johnny said.

'Yes. Charles lent them to me. Jazz records.'

'I didn't know you liked jazz.'

She thought she had never taken part in such a meaningless conversation. She tried to smile. 'Well, I do,' she said. She turned at the door of the bedroom, the smile fixed as a mask.

They were both watching her. Johnny with his elliptical eyes narrowed, Charles, helpless and appalled—so guilty that he looked physically ill. She saw the deep gulf between them. Whatever had happened to him, Johnny still trod the ground in armour; not righteousness but a steady awareness of right, sheltered him like steel. Charles would have looked exactly as he did, as shocked and ashamed, if he had been in Johnny's shoes. It was the anguish of the situation that tore him; he would feel guilty whether he was in the right or in the wrong.

Johnny followed her. He said, 'So it was Charles, was it?'

There was no point in pretending to misunderstand him; he had only to look at Charles's face.

'Yes.' She bent over the suitcase, pretending to have difficulty fastening the lock. She was more embarrassed than afraid. Johnny would not make a scene, his gentlemanly forbearance would protect them all. 'I told you it was over,' she whispered.

'Johnny,' Charles said from the drawing-room, 'I'd like to . . .

'Keep out of this, Franks.' Johnny had raised his voice no

more than a fraction but it was as shocking as a bellow on the barrack square. He closed the door of the bedroom and said to Mary, coldly and softly, 'You told me he was a gentleman.'

She looked up, frozen with astonishment. Johnny's face, equally frozen, stared back at her. Hysterically, she began to laugh: she heard her own laughter as if it were muffled by deep, black water, like the laughter of a drunken sailor might sound to a drowning man just pitched out of the boat.

Then Johnny's face changed. 'Christ,' he said. 'Christ . . .' He dragged the suitcase off the bed, tipped the contents onto the floor and stamped on them with the crude violence of an angry child. Briefly, it seemed that this was all it was, a child's helpless rage at some tormenting inadequacy. But when he lifted his face, it was ravaged, his mouth distorted. He glared at her. 'He's a bloody Jew,' he shouted.

She laughed again, wildly; it was the worst thing she could have done. He went white, swore under his breath, grabbed something off the bed and ran into the drawing-room, tearing the door open and slamming it shut behind him. She heard him shouting, caught her breath and cried out, 'Johnny, for heaven's sake.' She wrenched at the door. It stuck, it always stuck when you slammed it tightly, she remembered. Someone cried out in the room beyond and she flung her weight backwards, clinging to the handle. The door came open with a burst, almost throwing her backwards.

* * *

Charles was lying on the floor by the fireplace and Johnny was kneeling beside him. What she saw first was the blood.

'There's always a lot of blood from a face wound,' Johnny said.

The flesh was laid open on Charles's cheekbone. She said, horrified, 'Did you shoot him?'

Johnny made a queer sound in his throat that could almost have been a chuckle. 'My dear girl—you think I'd keep a

gun loaded? No—I chucked it at him. He lost his balance, hit his head on the fender.'

She took Johnny's handkerchief from his breast pocket and tried to wipe Charles's face. His eyes were closed. The blood was so dark and thick that it looked like sauce, pumping in thick, sticky spurts into his tangled hair. The sun, stretching across the carpet, almost reached his hair. Johnny was holding his limp wrist and feeling the pulse. Everything was very quiet and still. Nothing seemed real.

Johnny said, 'King George the Fifth.' She looked up, incredulous, and realized that he meant the nearest hospital. 'I'll get a taxi,' he said. He looked drained and ill.

The whole thing couldn't have taken much more than five minutes. Johnny was telephoning. She went on, dabbing at the blood with her handkerchief, not feeling anything, not daring to raise his head and the blood went on coming, soaking into the Persian rug. Johnny came back with a blanket and laid it carefully over him. He said, 'They're sending an ambulance. We've got to keep him warm.'

Charles's breathing was light, his face pale and sweaty under the blood. Johnny fetched a towel and folded it into a pad and held it against his face. The blood ran underneath it in dark streaks down his cheek towards his ear.

Johnny said, 'I could cut off my right hand.'

She said, 'It was an accident. He fell. It's just a flesh wound on his face. He hurt himself on the fender.'

'Does it matter?' His voice was anguished. 'I knocked him over—he may have cracked his skull. I may have killed him.'

'Don't talk like that.' She was astounded to find she was thinking quite clearly. They did not seem to be talking about Charles. 'Don't let anyone hear you say that,' she said. 'It's important to say the right thing.'

'For my sake?' he said in a shocked voice. She looked at him and saw that he *was* shocked: his face was set and his mouth taut with angry pride.

'Don't be so bloody grand and noble,' she said. 'Do you

want to finish yourself now? It wouldn't do any good. What do you want to do? Go to the police and own up? Please, sir, it was me broke the window with my little tennis ball.'

'Are you mad?'

'No,' she said desperately. 'No. Listen . . . please, Johnny . . . there may not be much time. Leave it to me, I beg of you. I'll tell them . . . you had a silly quarrel . . . he fell . . .'

He wasn't listening. He wasn't looking at her. It was as if she didn't exist. He stood up, his face pinched, 'Dear God, where is that ambulance?' He ran up the stairs.

He was back almost at once. 'They're here. It's going to be hell getting him up those stairs.'

Two men followed him with a stretcher. They laid it beside Charles and eased him carefully onto it. One of them lifted the soaked towel; the other felt his pulse.

'Easy does it.' The staircase was narrow. One of the men was fat and sweating like a bull. She took Johnny's hand as they followed the stretcher and he let her hold it, though his fingers gave no answering pressure.

At the door he said, 'You go. I'll stay here.'

'No.'

'Go with him,' he almost shouted, pushing her down the steps and towards the rear of the ambulance.

There was no time to argue. The fat man took her hand and heaved her up into the ambulance. She saw Johnny's face briefly, before they slammed the doors. He was staring after them. He must have touched his head with his hands; there was blood in his fair hair.

* * *

One of the men said, 'Are you his wife?'

She shook her head, swaying against the side of the ambulance, watching Charles on the stretcher covered with a red hospital blanket. She thought he looked dead. Outside the windows, the world rushed backwards, dark and watery and unreal through the navy blue glass.

'Don't worry,' the man said, 'He'll be all right. Seen worse, haven't we, Jock?'

He had a broad, kind face on which the skin hung in deep folds like a curtain. Hair, sparse on his head, sprouted fiercely from his ears and nostrils.

'Do you know his blood group, miss?'

'No.'

'Well never mind. Have him there in a minute.'

The ambulance slowed, crawled a few yards and then reversed. The doors opened, letting in a flood of painful light, two other men jumped in. They lifted the stretcher onto a trolley; there was a dark pool on the red rubber covering of the bench.

Mary followed the trolley into the hospital. A couple of nurses and a doctor in a white coat were bending over it. She couldn't see Charles's head. She waited. The doctor said something to one of the nurses and came over to her. 'It was a man that telephoned,' he said.

'My husband.'

He looked at her doubtfully. 'Your husband said he knocked him down.'

'It was an accident.'

'I see.' Surprisingly, a wave of colour shot up into his face. 'Well—it can wait. We'll have a look at him straightaway. Would you mind . . .' He indicated a polished wood bench at the side of the corridor.

'Of course.'

They were wheeling Charles along the corridor and into the lift. The doctor ran after them, young, thin legs leaping like pistons beneath his short white coat. The lift doors clanged shut, there was a smooth, oiled whine. One of the nurses came back to Mary.

'What are they going to do?'

'Taking him up to the ward. We're in luck. Mr. Dinnot's operating this morning. He'll be out of the theatre in a minute.'

'Who's Mr. Dinnot?'

'One of the consultants. He specializes in head injuries. She smiled, she was young and pretty and kind. 'Don't worry. We'll let you know as soon as we can. Would you like a cup of tea?'

'No thank you. I'd like to telephone.'

'There's a public box at the end of the corridor.'

She said helplessly, 'I haven't got any money.'

'Oh Lord . . .' The nurse let out a sharp sigh. 'You're not supposed to . . . oh, heavens, what does it matter? Look, there's one in the office.'

She showed Mary into the small room. There was a desk, a telephone and a smell of ether. As soon as she smelt it, Mary felt her stomach muscles tighten. 'Don't be long,' the nurse said. 'Sister'll have my hide.' She grinned like an excited little girl, her skin had the soft pearly look of a newly bathed baby's. 'Directory on the window sill.' She shut the door.

Mary leaned on the Sister's desk and looked at the telephone. Her hands were hot and shaking; she felt sick with the ether smell. She thought: Frederick won't be home, why should he, in the middle of the afternoon? But the telephone was on the landing outside his room. The landlady might answer it and know where he was.

The number rang and she counted the rings, estimating how long it would take the woman to climb up from her basement, up the foul, linoleum-covered stairs. The fear of not finding Frederick suddenly eclipsed everything else. It struck her with something of a shock that he should so obviously be the one to turn to, the only person she could be sure of. Poor silly fat Frederick with his foolish goodness, his unquestioning love.

He said, 'Hallo?'

She said stupidly, 'I didn't think you'd be in.'

'What did you want then? A chat with Ma Grainger?' His voice was hoarsely facetious. He explained. 'Touch of

bronchitis. It's what Mother always said. Everything flies to me chest.'

She said, 'Damn. Oh damn it all.'

'What's the matter?'

She told him, staring at a bowl of red roses on the desk.

He said slowly, 'What a terrible, bloody mess. What can I do?'

'Go to the flat. I can't leave the hospital yet. I don't want him left alone, Fred.'

'Of course not.'

The nurse opened the door and whispered like a schoolgirl keeping covey, 'Will you be long? Sister will be back in a minute.'

'Not long now,' she whispered back. The girl closed the door. She said to Frederick, 'Are you well enough? Should you go out?'

'I think my temperature's down,' he said, seriously attentive as always to every detail of health. 'But I'll be all right. I'll get a taxi.'

She felt a terrible fear suddenly, closing her eyes, seeing Johnny's face, a formless red blur against her red eyelids, opening her eyes to quick, unreal sunlight brightly spattering the desk. She had a cold sensation of drowning. 'Hurry, Fred. I'm frightened.'

'Has he still got the gun?'

'I don't know: It wasn't loaded.' The question hung poised between them. Incredibly, she found herself yawning.

Frederick said, 'No, Mary, it's not possible. Believe me . . . Then he added quickly, almost frantically, 'I *must* go. . . .

* * *

She sat on the bench in the hall watching the nurses go past. They were all young and pretty, their bodies soft and vulnerable, narrow-backed, pert-hipped. The light, swimming through windows, was soft, lazily warm and clear. She felt a ridiculous desire for sleep and fought it wearily, drifting

into a hazy nothingness and then coming back with a jerk to the light, polished corridor and the warm wood of the bench.

The doctor arrived and took her into a small surgery off the casualty ward. He sat her down in a chair and began to talk to her, but his voice was a distant, unnecessary nuisance like the voice from someone else's radio.

She murmured, 'I'm sorry—so stupid. I only want to go to sleep.'

He said something and bent over her. His breath smelt of garlic. She felt his hand under her arm and had a queer, sliding sensation. Then she was lying flat with something soft under her head. The distant voice said, 'Natural reaction—after earthquakes—people often go to sleep . . .'

'This is farcical,' she said aloud, and slept.

When she woke, she was lying on a couch in the surgery, a narrow room shaped like a shoe-box. The walls were mustard yellow and a curtain patterned with blue and yellow roses hung at one end instead of a door. She sat up, bewildered, and a nurse clattered the curtain rings and stood at the end of the couch.

'You're awake.' She was middle aged and fat with soft, pear-shaped breasts that billowed like downy cushions under her apron. Her body looked like a feather bed bisected by a stout leather belt but her face was hard and scratched as an old saddle and wore an expression of complacent indignation.

Mary said, 'I'm sorry—how long have I been asleep?'

She looked at her watch. 'Half an hour. Dr. Carter said you were not to be disturbed.' Her grey eyes disapproved of these instructions. 'Dr. Carter would like to see you, when you're ready. He's in Sister's office,' she said, turning with a creak of leather. Her back rolled like a stuffed sausage over her belt.

Mary said, 'Please—wait a minute. How is he?'

'Mr. Franks? As comfortable as can be expected.'

'What does that mean?'

'Mr. Dinnot will examine him again after tea.'

It was clear that she intended to tell Mary nothing, although when they got to the Sister's office there was no sign of Dr. Carter. It was three o'clock. Mary waited for ten minutes and it seemed like an eternity. When he came he sat down behind the desk, very slow in all his movements, and made out an official form, asking her for Charles's full name and address, his religion, the name and address of his next of kin.

'I don't know,' she said. 'He has an uncle. I don't know his address.' She leaned across the table. 'Please, how is he?'

He gave her a nervous look and squared off all the papers on the desk, very neatly. 'Quite comfortable at the moment. The facial injury seems to be superficial though it looks nasty enough. There's a crack fracture of the skull but no sign of compression as yet.'

'I don't understand.' She smiled at him to show that she was quite controlled and that she wanted him to explain to her.

'It means pressure on the brain.'

'What are you going to do?'

'At the moment? Keep him under observation. It looks like straightforward concussion at present—temperature's well down and the blood pressure, no evidence of sub-dural haemorrhage though it's not always easy to tell. He's had a lucid period but it didn't come too soon after the injury—in some ways that's a good sign.' He looked at her, seeming to be encouraged by the calmness of her attitude and went on as if he were talking to a student. 'Head injuries are tricky things. You know the sort of case most laymen are acquainted with—the footballer who's knocked out, recovers to finish the game and collapses and dies later on? Severe brain injury can occur without much damage to the bone.'

'Do you mean he could die?' She heard her voice, calm, light; it did not seem to belong to her.

He looked uncomfortable as if he had said more than he had meant to. 'It's always possible, though in this case I should think extremely unlikely. But no one could give you

an exact prognosis yet. Not even Dinnot. *Particularly* not Dinnot. He's a tremendously cagey chap.' He grinned rather shyly. The grin and his change of tone made Mary aware how very young he was.

She said, 'How soon will you know?'

'Twenty-four hours, perhaps.' He paused. 'I'm sorry, Mrs. . . .'

'Prothero.'

'Mrs. Prothero.'

He looked at her with nice, worried eyes; clearly he did not like what he had got to say. 'Of course, I daresay the hospital will have to make a report about this—this accident.'

She felt dizzy as if the blood had suddenly drained from her head. She clenched her hands onto the desk for support. The smell of ether assaulted her stomach and she felt sick again. It seemed terribly important to continue to speak in an ordinary voice. She said, 'Is that necessary?'

He re-arranged his papers again, not looking at her. 'Of course it's a formality we don't always go through with. But I thought I had better tell you. The hospital has to be in the clear, you see. If there's any chance, any suspicion—you know what I mean.'

He looked at her awkwardly. She stood up, forced herself to smile at him. 'Yes,' she said. 'Thank you. I know what you mean.'

20

'He's gone,' Frederick said.

In spite of the warm day, he was sitting in the drawing-room in his overcoat, a fawn woollen muffler tied round his neck. His face was blotchy and he was coughing.

Johnny had gone by the time Frederick arrived. He had

stood on the doorstep ringing the bell helplessly for some fifteen minutes before the woman who lived in the ground-floor flat came out to see what he wanted.

Her appearance disconcerted Frederick. She looked like a mummified child; small, stringy, with a tiny, round, artless face, little black eyes and long, dyed yellow hair tugged back from her forehead in an Alice band. Skinny old legs protruded beneath her full, dirndl skirt and ended in white ankle socks and ballet pumps. Frederick remembered Mary had once told him that she had rich relations in America and that it was generally supposed they paid her handsomely to stay in London; certainly she had no other visible means, Mary said, of paying the high-ish rent and buying the yoghurt and gin which was all she appeared to live on. Her origins were obscure: she claimed to be Hungarian but her voice was a flat, whiney, sub-genteel drawl. Frederick thought she had probably been a high-class tart who had been careful with her earnings. The Protheros had spoken of her as a joke; he did not find her at all funny.

She had a key to the flat. She opened the door and insisted on going in with him.

'There's been trouble,' she informed him eagerly, skipping down the steep stairs in a whirl of skirts. 'I heard it.' She lowered her voice and turned to him confidingly, breathing out gin. 'A terrible scene.' Her eyes were round and cold as boot buttons. 'You can hear everything in these flats. I could tell you some tales.'

'No thank you,' Frederick said, coldly bewildered.

The button eyes snapped with excitement. 'It's not very nice, is it? Think of the rent I pay! And for what—to be exposed to all this terrible shouting and screaming? It's more than flesh and blood can stand,' she announced with satisfaction.

Frederick thought she was certainly drunk and probably mad but he was afraid to offend her. The ceilings were thick enough but there was always the chance she had heard some-

thing—lying flat with her ear pressed to the floor boards, he thought grimly. He persuaded her to sit down which she did reluctantly—there was a landlady air about her as she peered round, alert for signs of disorder—and lit her cigarette. She fluttered her eyelashes, gummed together with shiny little beads of mascara. He tried not to look at her elderly knees, coquettishly bared for his benefit.

‘There couldn’t have been very much to hear,’ he said carefully. ‘A friend of Mr. Prothero’s fell and cut his head.’

Her small mouth, a withered rosebud, parted in a significant leer. ‘You weren’t here, dear, were you?’

‘Nor were you.’

‘Oh yes I was.’ She drew on her jet cigarette holder and exhaled lengthily through her nostrils. ‘I happened to be in the hall when Mr. Prothero was on the phone. Asking for an ambulance. I heard every word he said. The front door was open and he wasn’t exactly whispering. Be as quick as you can, he said, I may have killed him.’

She drew in her breath on a long, triumphant hiss, stood up and advanced confidentially on Frederick who retreated slightly, a cold flood of despair in his heart. ‘Mind you, I’d expected something, I won’t deny it. I saw them both come in from my front window, first Mr. Prothero, then the other one. The one she’s been carrying on with.’

‘This is none of your business,’ Frederick said loudly. He knew he ought to talk to her, persuade her to keep her mouth shut, but his chief concern was to get her out of the flat. His head ached and his chest felt tight-bound, he had very little energy to spare.

‘You can’t help knowing what’s going on when it’s pushed under your nose, can you? Mind you, I don’t blame her, though I must say I was surprised. A bit of a madam, I always thought. “My husband is away on a business trip.” As if I cared. And I wouldn’t grudge anyone a bit of fun. But when I saw the other one coming up the steps, I thought—watch out, now, there’ll be trouble.’

'So you stood in the hall and listened?'

She smiled on him with drunken affection. 'That's right, dear.' Her eyes swivelled round the room. 'They've got a nice enough home, haven't they? A lot of really nice things. But you can never tell from appearances, can you? Business trips! As if I couldn't read the papers.' She roamed the room, waving her cigarette holder. Frederick watched her miserably as she trailed her knotted fingers along the surface of a console table. He had the fantastic idea that she was looking for dust. She kicked aside a blanket that was lying in a heap on the hearthrug and pounced with a squawk of excitement. 'Blood,' she said with such feverish, Maria Marten intensity, that Frederick almost laughed aloud.

'I told you,' he said weakly. 'The man fell and hit his head on the fender.'

She tossed her head. 'I don't believe that for a minute.' Her eyes glittered. 'Mr. Prothero shot him.'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'We must get the police.'

Frederick said with edgy patience, 'Listen. There's been an accident. Why should the police be interested?'

'Mr. Prothero cleared off fast enough, didn't he? I saw him leave, just after the ambulance had gone.'

'I expect he went to the hospital.' A fit of laughter and painful coughing seized him at the same time. He sank, convulsed, into a chair and she stood over him, her shrunken baby face twitching with her desire to be involved as deeply as possible.

'This is terrible. Someone has been shot—I'm sure I heard a shot—maybe he's dead. If you won't call the police, I will.'

Frederick lay back in his chair. He thought: if she sounds mad enough, they won't take any notice of her. 'Call them if you like. But be careful. It's an offence to invent things. You'd better not say you heard something you didn't hear.'

She started up an indignant tirade but he closed his eyes

and kept them closed. He felt so ill that it became, after a minute or so, quite easy to ignore her. In fact, he did not know she had left the room until he heard the door slam at the top of the stairs. He stood up slowly and went through the flat, barely aware, at the beginning of his search, what he was looking for. He picked up the blanket, took it into the bathroom and washed out the blood on one corner. Then he got a bowl of water and scrubbed fussily at the stain on the rug. A little later he found the gun, lying beneath the bureau. It was filthy dirty; no one could have fired it. He wiped it carefully on his handkerchief and put it away in a drawer.

* * *

Mary said, 'Did she telephone the police?'

'I shouldn't think so. They would have been here by now. He looked at her shocked face and said gently, 'I shouldn't worry about her, Mary. She's crazy as a coot.'

'Not crazy enough. You believed her, didn't you? You believed what she said about Charles and me?'

'Not because she said it.' He smiled at her tentatively. 'I had an idea there was something like that.'

She looked hard at the wall behind his head as if she had just noticed something remarkably absorbing there. He wanted to comfort her but the pale, almost scornful remoteness of her face made him feel shy and discouraged.

He said, 'I thought perhaps Johnny would have gone to the hospital.'

It was the first time either of them had spoken as if Johnny's absence was worrying. They had behaved as if he was off on some errand known to both of them and was simply a little late in coming home.

'No.' She stood up, lit a cigarette, inhaled once and threw it, smouldering, into the empty grate.

'What's the time, Fred?'

'Half past six.'

'Not already?'

She turned to him quickly. Her frightened eyes acknowledged that there was no point in pretending any more. 'Fred—where is he? Why doesn't he come back?'

He stirred restlessly in his chair and coughed. 'I don't know. Would he have gone home—to Fitchet?'

'Not without telling me. I don't think he would have gone there anyway. Lester was going back tonight.'

He did not understand her argument. 'Would that be a reason not to go to Fitchet? Oughtn't you to get hold of Lester anyway?'

'No,' she said, with such violence that he jumped. She looked at him and smiled with painful effort. 'Sorry—I didn't mean to shout. But I can't *bear* the thought of him knowing.' Her face twisted and she sat down in a chair with her hands pressed tight into her belly. 'Not just because of what I've done, though I suppose that's part of it, but because to tell him would be like—like admitting that everything has broken down.' She let out a long, quivering breath. 'Lester's found him a job. In an oil company. But even Lester's family feeling has limits. If this comes out, it'll be the end of everything.'

'Can you hide it?' he said, astounded.

'Isn't it possible? Surely—if the hospital doesn't go to the police, or that terrible woman upstairs, and if Charles is all right—all that has happened is that Johnny simply lost his temper. . . .' Her face was wide-awake suddenly, her eyes appealed to him. He saw she was going through one of her energetic renewals of hope. 'The main thing, isn't it, is to find him before he does something utterly silly? He's quite capable of doing anything—even of giving himself up to the police. He doesn't know, you see, he may even think . . .'

Frederick finished the sentence flatly. 'That he has killed Charles?'

He felt coldly distant from her.

She winced. '*Don't*. Oh, please Fred. Don't look so shocked. You think it's terrible to bother about his job at a time like this, don't you? I'm *sorry*. I can't help it. The only

thing I can do is to hope that he comes back, that everything is all right.' Her voice caught in a husky sob. 'Fred—where would he go?'

'To walk—get drunk—any one of a hundred things.

'That's no help, is it? We want to find him. Can't you think of anyone—anyone he might go to?'

He said tiredly, 'Oakes. He might go to Len Oakes.'

'He couldn't help him. Why should he go to him?'

He looked at her, astonished by the flat anger in her voice. 'Where else could he go? Mary . . .' He coughed to clear the harshness from his throat.

Her face flushed slightly, she made a queer little whimpering sound in her throat. He thought her expression showed that whatever courage she had had was definitely gone. But she said, after a minute, 'All right. Then we had better find Oakes, hadn't we?'

* * *

The street was two lines of old, tall houses through which a suddenly cold little wind crept sluggishly, barely disturbing the newspapers in the gutters. It was a silent street, some of the houses were quite empty, their windows boarded up; outside one of them, half on the pavement, there was a derelict Austin Seven. Four wheels were gone, the wind-screen bashed in. It looked like an abandoned Dinkey toy.

'They're coming down,' Frederick said.

'What?'

'The houses. They're going to build blocks of flats.'

There was still light in the sky but barely enough in the dying street to see the numbers on the houses. Frederick peered at a door with fumbling, short-sighted nervousness; when he found the strip of cardboard in the line of rusted bells, his face betrayed his reluctance.

'Why don't you ring?' she said.

'I don't think he'll be there. It was only a stupid idea. I don't know what to say to him if he is.'

'We can't just do nothing,' she bullied him. 'Are you crazy?'

He mopped at his forehead and said faintly, 'I think I'm ill.'

'For heaven's sake . . .' She pushed him away impatiently and rang the bell. There was a faint tinny sound deep inside the house. Nothing happened. She rang again, forcefully, keeping her finger on the bell. This time a window creaked above their heads and a woman's voice shouted something. They stood back from the house and looked up. The woman's face was in shadow but her silhouette looked young. She said, 'Who's that?'

Her voice echoed as in a tunnel. It sounded shockingly loud.

Frederick said hoarsely, 'Mrs. Oakes?'

She didn't answer for a minute. The breeze caught her hair and the strands spiked up momentarily round her face. Then she said, 'Yes. That's me. What d'you want?'

'Just a talk, Mrs. Oakes.' He glanced warningly at Mary. 'I'm a friend of Len's.'

'Oh it's *you*,' she said. 'Why didn't you say so? Half a minute.'

She withdrew her head, re-appeared, threw a key out of the window. It clanked on the pavement. 'Come on up.' She slammed down the window.

The passage and stairs were evilly dark and smelt of dust and urine and disuse. The house felt empty. There was a nightlight burning on the first landing where part of the banisters had fallen away. Frederick picked it up and climbed upwards, his head and shoulders monstrously shadowed on the flaking distemper of the wall.

Mary said, 'Johnny wouldn't know places like this existed.'

'Even Johnny can learn,' he said dryly. He stopped and looked down. With the nightlight elevated in his hand and his shadow behind it on the wall, he looked grotesque. 'What do you know about Len Oakes, Mary?'

'I know that he fell in love with Johnny when they were in prison.' Disgust rose up in her as she spoke and she tried to

crush it down. She said, 'It—was a terrible shock to Johnny.'

'I believe that.' Frederick's voice held a very faint overtone of amusement. Then he sighed. 'He had a lot of illusions.'

'Don't talk about him in the past tense,' she said with quick irritability that arose, she recognized, out of a deep embarrassment.

'I'm sorry.' He stood still, peering downwards. All she could see of him were his glasses, two blind headlamps, and the tufts of his thinning hair outlined by the soft, night-nursery light. Then he took off his glasses and wiped the sweat off the brink of his nose. 'I'm sorry,' he repeated with a dry, reflective sadness. 'I hoped that was something he would never find out.'

She was touched and ashamed. 'What an old nanny you are, Fred.'

He sighed again, replaced his glasses and climbed on, round the bend in the rickety stair.

* * *

'Yes. He's been here,' Mrs. Oakes said.

She sat, swinging long legs on the edge of the table that held the remains of the last meal, a fair-sized duck, eaten to the bones, several dirty saucepans, the stale end of a loaf and a half-empty packet of butter.

Her voice was coarse but soft and agreeable. 'They had a good meal,' she said. 'Young men need a good meal inside them. Duck and potatoes and a good green salad. Nothing out of a tin.'

'Len says you're a good cook,' Frederick said.

She smiled slowly. 'Anyone can be. Most people don't bother, that's all. You only have to take a little trouble. For example, I always cook duck with oranges. It cuts the grease.' She turned her head towards Mary and smiled beyond her as if she were regarding herself in a mirror. 'I always follow the recipes in the papers. There's often something new in the papers. Len likes variety.'

She wore a dirty mauve and white kimono and the room was filthy in a way that must have taken years to accumulate. She sat in the middle of it, unconcerned, grubby, but beautiful, one milky arm bared as she raised it to push back her hair. She would be fat quite soon but now the bones of her magnificent face were only gently blurred by flesh, the rounded contours, the heavy, sculptured chin of a Roman beauty. She carried her flesh sensuously, touching it as if she loved it. Her eyes were hyacinth blue and bland as a wicked child's.

'It's terrible the way some people cook,' she said. 'A sin and a shame. Bought meat pies, filleted kippers. I wouldn't even give them to a dog. I had a dog once—I gave him a pound of meat a day, fresh from the butcher. I didn't care when he ran away, though. He was only a mongrel. I'd like to get an Alsatian. That's a good breed.'

'Yes,' Frederick said. 'Where have they gone, do you know?'

She smiled at Mary, caressingly. 'Is your husband in trouble? I don't want to do any harm to anyone.'

'You won't. We just want to know where he's gone.'

She got off the table and walked, lazily as a lioness, over to the radio that stood on a bamboo table by the unmade bed. She switched it on. It was between stations; a French voice read the news against a background of fleshy crooning. She picked up the indistinct tune, humming softly, half shutting her eyes. 'Any friend of Len's is a friend of mine. I wouldn't want to get him into trouble.'

'Of course not.' Frederick coughed in a sudden spasm, muffling his mouth in his scarf.

'That's nasty,' Mrs. Oakes said with interest. 'In the tubes, isn't it? You ought to learn how to breathe. Last year, Len and I took lessons from an Indian gentleman.'

Scarlet faced, Frederick smiled at her politely.

'Another thing is to take yeast. Just a little every morning. Brewer's yeast, not made-up stuff from the chemist. All the goodness is out of it.'

'Please,' Mary said. 'Please, Mrs. Oakes. It's very important. Tell me where my husband is.'

Mrs. Oakes looked at her with the maudlin intensity some women achieve when drunk, but she wasn't drunk.

'You won't get him back like that, dear, I can tell you. It's just no damn good, running after a man.'

She spoke with a condescending authority that Mary would have found silly in another woman, but Mrs. Oakes intimidated her. She had that air of cosy self-satisfaction that makes other people examine the insecure foundations of their own assurance: Mary's confidence broke like glass against it.

'Fred—say something,' she appealed.

Mrs. Oakes laughed. 'It's no good asking him. What would he know about it?'

Frederick said quietly, 'Mr. Prothero is in trouble. We only want to help him. We can't help him unless we know where he is.'

'What'll you do if I tell you?' she said. She narrowed her eyes into sleepily arrogant, blue slits and swayed towards the dirty table, resting one hand stagily on the edge of it and throwing back her head. It was so careful a pose that the temporary awe with which Mary had regarded her crumpled instantly. She was an outdated *femme fatale*, a devitalized Dietrich, hunching a pale shoulder out of her filthy kimono with a second-hand provocativeness.

'We'll pay you,' she said contemptuously.

Mrs. Oakes turned her back, went to the bamboo table and turned up the radio. The sobbing tune rose to a wailing boom against which the animated foreign voice crackled despairingly. She remained, presenting her back to the room and moving her hips gently in time to the music.

Frederick said—he must have spoken quite loudly but it sounded a thread of a whisper against the volume of sound in the room—'It's no good offering money.' His eyes glinted with pale humour. 'Not baldly, anyway. She has her pride, as

I daresay she'll be prepared to tell you. Sentiment's the line to take—you pull out every throbbing organ stop.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Mary said. 'She can't simply refuse to tell us. . . .' She had an odd thought that surprised her: if Lester were here, he would know how to deal with this woman.

'Can't she?' Frederick had a coughing fit. He spluttered, 'You go. Wait downstairs. I'll see if I can get it out of her.'

When Mary left the room, Mrs. Oakes did not even glance at her. She stood on the doorstep, watching the light die over the rooftops and raging inwardly. Frederick did not keep her long. He came slowly down the stairs, wheezing sharply at each intake of breath. 'Len's on the night run to Liverpool,' he said huskily. 'Johnny's with him.'

'Why couldn't she say so?' For the moment Mary was no more than sharply irritated.

'A taste for mystery. Allied to self-preservation. If most of the people you know are engaged in some form of criminal activity, it makes you devious.'

She smiled, amused, and then, as they went into the street, seemed to step into cold, grotesque reality.

'What can we do?' she cried, clutching Frederick's arm. 'Oh Fred—what can we do?'

He looked at her. He was rosy with fever, and shivering. He said, 'I wish to hell I knew.'

21

'I HATE myself,' Mary said. She spoke unemotionally, almost flatly, but her face was white.

'Things are never one person's fault,' Frederick murmured. 'It's more complicated than that.'

He lay back in Martin's bed, sipping hot milk, his face pallid and apologetic above his cotton underwear. He had been too ill to go home and Mary had had to help him out of the taxi and down the stairs to the flat, but he was still ashamed. He was always ashamed, out of humility, when people did things for him.

'This was my fault, wasn't it?' She clenched one fist and struck it hard against the end of the bed. 'Smug, hypocritical bitch,' she said in the same cold, level tone. 'I was so damned sure of myself, wasn't I? I thought—if the old rules don't fit, you throw them away and make new ones. Sex isn't wrong, it's healthy and normal—if your husband doesn't suit you, go elsewhere. It doesn't matter, as long as no one gets hurt. But it *does* matter—it mattered before this happened. You can't go against what you believe and stay whole. Oh—I can't *look* at myself, Fred.' She flinched, as if the words had stabbed at her physically.

He said pityingly, 'It's not an easy thing, to adjust your conscience.'

'And it doesn't *work*, does it? You can use any argument you like but it's only a trick to get what you want in the end. Once you see that you hate yourself more than if you'd simply done something you knew was wrong.'

'It's always harder to work out your own rules. If you're an honest person, that is.' He looked at her pale, set face and said gently, 'Don't blame yourself too much. It's a kind of pride. No one with any heart would blame you.'

'Oh God—does that matter? I wish they would. I wish everyone would spit at me, throw stones, like they did at that woman in the Bible.' She gave a shuddering sob and thrust the back of her hand against her mouth.

'Of course you do,' he said with a brief, tired smile. 'It makes it easier. If people blame you, you can start defending yourself. But I'm not going to blame you. I opted out of that scheme a long time ago.'

She was still for a minute, pressing her knuckles hard

against her teeth, her eyes watching him with something like terror. Then she said, 'I'm sorry, Fred. I'm being abominably selfish. You're ill. . . .'

'I can still talk. It's about all I can do,' he said bitterly.

'There's nothing anyone can do.' She relaxed wearily on the bed, her legs drawn up under her. Her weight pulled the bedclothes uncomfortably tight across him. She said, 'I still don't really understand. Why it happened, I mean. Johnny knew I'd been unfaithful to him, though he didn't know who the man was. And he didn't seem to mind much. That isn't just a careful little assessment to put me in the clear. He wasn't jealous—he didn't blame me, Fred.'

'He wouldn't blame you because you're a woman,' he said. 'That's partly chivalry—the weaker vessel and all that—and partly because women don't count with him. Morally, I mean, not sexually. He wouldn't expect a woman, even his wife, to be loyal in the way he'd expect a man to be. He wouldn't, even, have lost his temper with Charles if he'd been a stranger. Charles was his friend. That *outraged* him.' The colour crept up under his freckled skin. 'He loathed disloyalty.'

'It sounds so schoolboyish,' she said uncomfortably.

'There are worse codes.'

'As long as you don't expect other people to stick to it. He was bound to get hurt, wasn't he, if he believed that Julian, for example, was still the honourable captain of the first eleven?'

'Why shouldn't he believe that? *He* hadn't changed, you see?'

She said dully, 'No. Johnny wouldn't seduce his best friend's wife. But the temptation was hardly there, was it?'

'I'm sorry, Mary.' Frederick's mouth quivered very slightly and an isolated, pale tear crept onto his cheek. 'Look—let's leave this, shall we? Just say he had bad luck with his friends.'

'Let's hope Len Oakes doesn't let him down too,' she said savagely. 'For God's sake, Fred—do we have to go on

talking about Johnny as if he was a good, clean-handed stickler for the Queensberry rules who's been manhandled by a gang of dirty fighters?'

She was beginning to sound hysterical. He said gently, 'It's true in a way, isn't it? He's a good man. That's partly his background, if you like—he's never had to learn to be wary. And good men are often at a disadvantage.'

He spoke with a kind of weary stubbornness that showed the strength of his illusion, the depth of his love. She was touched and then suddenly angry; his faith seemed to reproach her. She said, 'He's not so perfect. Maybe he lost his temper because Charles was his friend. But the thing that triggered it off, that finally tipped him over the edge was that Charles was a *Jew*. Oh—that's not something he'd admit to in the ordinary way, he has himself on too tight a rein. But when he got angry, he screamed it out. It was grotesque, horrible. . . .'

He touched her cheek gently with the tips of hot fingers. 'That's not important, you know that. It was just a handy brick to throw. Everyone has primitive impulses, even Johnny. I never said he was a saint. If he has prejudices, he can't help them, no one can. The best any man can ever do is to be ashamed of them, not to let them count. And you know that he never would in the ordinary way. Only he was terribly provoked.'

'I know that,' she said painfully. 'I'm sorry, Fred. I didn't mean it. I suppose I was trying to defend Charles—or myself.'

'You don't have to defend Charles. He doesn't need it. And I wasn't attacking him. I just think that in the ordinary way he's perfectly capable of looking after himself. He's got his own defences.'

'And Johnny hasn't?'

'No.' He smiled, though there were deep lines of anxiety round his mouth and eyes. 'He's wide open. Someone like Charles, you see, knows that in order to live you've got to be clever and complex and wade through a lot of muck—though because he's a decent sort of man he'll hold his nose and keep

his boots as clean as he can. Johnny might know this intellectually but he'll never believe it emotionally. He'll never forgive himself for what he's done, he won't even try to explain it away as most of us would have to do sooner or later if life was to be tolerable at all. He'll live with his guilt until his dying day.'

'Don't,' she said. 'I can't bear any more.'

'I'm sorry, dear.' He lay back, his face ashen suddenly, his eyes closed.

She said, 'What will happen to him, Fred? He's run away—I suppose for the first time in his life.'

'I wish to God I knew.' It sounded like a prayer.

'But you *must* know,' she cried frantically. 'You know what the legal position is, don't you? Can they prosecute him? Charles will say it was an accident. . . .' She thought: as long as he lives. It was something she could not say.

'You know that's not the important thing,' Frederick said.

* * *

He fell asleep almost immediately. Mary filled a thermos with warm milk and left it beside him. Then she lay down on her own bed, smoking and waiting. She smoked two cigarettes slowly and tried to read but the words were meaningless marks on the page. She got off the bed and wandered round the flat, standing for a long time at the door of Frederick's room, listening to his shallow, scratchy breathing. A little later, she put on a light coat, thinking that she might go out for a walk and then remembered that Johnny might telephone. She looked at the instrument, black and dusty on the dusty table, and felt afraid. She lifted the receiver and dialled the operator.

She said, 'I'm sorry to trouble you, but I'm expecting a long-distance call. Has anyone been trying to get through?'

'What is your number, caller?' Mary told her. 'I'll check with the supervisor and ring you back.'

Mary waited, breathing lightly, staring at her reflection

in the wall mirror. There were glistening beads of sweat on her nose; she rubbed them away with the back of her hand. She let the telephone ring three times before she picked up the receiver.

'We have no record of any long-distance calls to your number,' the operator said.

'I see. Thank you very much.'

There was nothing else she could do. In the end, she lay down on her bed again and slept, off and on through the night, with bad dreams. She woke, stiff and cold at first light. The window was a square of deep, transparent blue. Outside, in the area, a grey cat crouched motionless on the dustbin, eyes glowing like yellow mica, fur ruffling in the faint, dawn wind.

Frederick was still asleep, breathing more easily. She closed the curtains so that the early sun should not wake him. She shut his door gently and went into the tiny hall to telephone the hospital. The Ward Sister had a pretty, Irish voice. Mr. Franks had had a comfortable night. They were very pleased with him. He was awake now, could she give him a message? Mary was startled by her friendliness, so warm and unauthoritative. 'Only my love,' she said.

In the kitchen, watching the percolator bubble grainy brown, she felt suddenly only relaxed and tired as if she had been up all night at a dance. She told herself that she was infinitely relieved, though in fact she had not really expected bad news, not simply out of a hardy, irrational optimism, but because when the worst might happen her nature made it impossible to expect it. Even when death was inevitable, as at the end of a wearying, mortal illness, it would still strike her with a quality of ghastly surprise. And she had not once admitted that Charles might die. She thought of him as she thought of herself, as tough, indestructible, able to be hurt or humiliated but never to be finally broken, not a person to pity.

Not like Johnny, in whom humiliation was pitiable. She could think of Charles's suffering without shrinking; it was

physical, could be dulled with drugs, would one day be over and forgotten. Johnny's was a slow, endless torture, the agony of a man who has had the best of his life and knows it.

Or did he know it? She thought with a quick, bright gleam of hope: no one is beaten until they believe they are. Of course he was desperate and despairing now or he would not have run off to Oakes, but she could make him see reason, give him a belief in survival. Drinking the strong coffee she felt resilient, able to dismiss Frederick's argument that Johnny was exceptionally vulnerable as sentimental nonsense. He had had bad luck, he had been to prison, but for something that loomed no larger in the eyes of the men who could help him, than a young man's mistake. He had injured a friend in a moment of justifiable anger. Men did worse things, endured worse things, and went on living. For a little while she was able to think like that. Despair has its limits, she was content to let it fade like the morning star outside. Johnny was bound to telephone quite soon. Whatever agony had torn him yesterday would have receded by now and the considerate habits of a lifetime would assert themselves. He would realize she was worried, would want to reassure her; instead, she could reassure *him*. She could give him good news about Charles, beg him to come home.

It wasn't until much later in the morning, when he did not ring, that doubt returned. She began to see that she had been arguing from her own standpoint, not from his. There was a difference—and not just because she had a woman's lack of principle, a woman's capacity for survival. The difference lay in the quality of their expectations.

Like most people, she had never expected very much. She had never been starved or badly treated or very frightened; she had had no harsher teachers than Mrs. Ames, known no cruelty other than the low-grade, unintentional cruelty of careless or stupid people; but she had been brought up in a world where no one thought her important; taught, early on, that she could hope for no especial privileges, that any se-

curity above the meanest she must grab and hold for herself. It was a world in which decency might win, but only by a short head.

Johnny's upbringing had not only been more comfortable, but more morally attentive, his mind was cared for in the same automatic way as his fine young teeth, his education handed over to gentle, conscientious men like Sandlewood who would never be careless or stupid, to whom a child was a precious trust to be protected and taught to be honourable and courteous and tolerant. Most children unlearned these lessons fast enough, but Johnny had learned them too well without ever understanding the rider: that the world is a decent place just as long as you are buttressed by money, or like Frederick, have learned to live without it. The war did not harm him, it merely lengthened the period of illusion so that by the time it ended the facts of life were distorted beyond his powers of correction. He expected to return to a world that was still securely held, behind safe walls.

Most people's education is a little hypocritical, the world is not the place we would like our children to believe it is. She began to see, with growing, impotent anger, that Johnny's had been a large-scale confidence trick.

* * *

The morning dragged on. Mary opened all the windows in the flat, letting in the gentle, shifting sun. It was a lovely day, not too warm, with a light breeze that was little more than a soft, pleasant movement of the air.

She telephoned Fitchet after Lester had left for town, not quite sure in her own mind whether her timing was deliberate or accidental. She spoke to the foreign maid who said that Sir Lester had not been worried when they had not returned the evening before. He had simply assumed they had decided to spend the night at the flat. It was exactly the answer Mary had expected—had hoped for—but she was conscious of an odd, perverse feeling of disappointment. There was nothing

she could do, she was sure of it, but she could not avoid the feeling that if Lester knew what had happened, he would be bound to think of something. It was purely instinctive, an almost superstitious trust in his wholesome, bulky practicality, but when Frederick suggested she should get hold of him at his office, every nerve end in her body recoiled.

'I'll have to tell him soon,' she said. 'If Johnny doesn't come back. Or if he doesn't telephone. But not yet, Fred. Let's give it a little longer. . . .'

He shrugged his shoulders. He was up and dressed, though he still looked pale and sick. 'Aren't you just putting it off? Or course it's embarrassing, but he is his uncle. You can't let it drag on too long.'

'I don't want to make any more telephone calls,' she said quickly. 'Johnny is bound to try and ring soon. What time would they be due in Liverpool? He may not have had a chance before.'

'I don't know.'

'It can't be much longer.'

'I hope not.' Frederick's anxious eyes blinked at her. His expression held an embarrassed pity and it repelled her.

'You don't have to stay. I shall be all right.'

'Of course I'll stay,' he said wanly.

The telephone rang once. It was the local laundry who had been trying to deliver some sheets; the man had called several times but had been unable to get an answer.

'We've been away,' Mary said. 'I'm sorry. Oh—it doesn't *matter*. Next time the man comes he can leave the box in the hall.' Bright spots appeared in her cheeks. 'For God's sake—*yes*. I'll accept the responsibility if it's stolen.'

She slammed down the receiver with adventitious indignation. 'How stupid people can be,' she muttered, glaring at Frederick.

After that, the telephone remained silent. Nobody came. Nothing happened. They sat in the drawing-room and drank black coffee and smoked. When her packet was finished, she

went through the flat with methodical desperation, flinging open drawers, searching cupboards, diving into coat pockets in the wardrobe. In the end she found two stale, dry cigarettes in a box of Florentine leather that had fallen down at the back of the bookcase. She smoked them and then sat, doing nothing. It was a long, quite useless vigil.

* * *

The policeman came just before midday. He was a fat man, bulging in his uniform, with a polished, red face.

'Mrs. Prothero?'

'Yes.'

He cleared his throat noisily. 'I wonder if you'd mind coming down to the station. The Inspector would like a word with you.'

'What about?'

He looked perplexed, just a little worried. 'It's to do with your husband, Mrs. Prothero. I was just to ask you to come.'

The long apathy of the morning vanished. For a moment she was terrified, her legs shook under her, sickness rose in her throat. The policeman's face bobbed in front of her as inanely as a red balloon with a face painted on it. Then, suddenly, though her body still trembled, it was only with the quivering excitement of relief. One of two things had happened: either the drunk in the first-floor flat had made some ridiculous, garbled statement to the police, or Johnny had given himself up. Of course—the thought came into her mind like a fresh morning wind blowing out all the old, stale fears of the night—*of course* that is exactly what he would do. How could she ever have doubted it? For the first time she admitted the knowledge that she had shrunk from up to now, that he had not known whether Charles was alive or dead. It was as beautifully simple as the solving of a geometry problem once you know all the stages. If Johnny had thought Charles was dead, or even badly hurt, he would certainly have gone to a police station once his first despair, his first wild

panic, had subsided. It was unthinkable, wasn't it, that he should do anything else?

She smiled at the policeman, whirled down the stairs into the flat.

Frederick said in a quiet, hurried voice, 'I'll come with you.'

'I'll be better alone.' She smiled at him. She knew exactly what she was going to say. Nothing but the truth; the truth would show Johnny had not been to blame.

His forehead creased. 'Don't be too heroic. They'll see through that.'

She touched his arm, loving him for his sad concern but desperately anxious to shake it off like a nice, but gloomy companion on a voyage. 'I'll be sensible,' she said.

* * *

They drove, in the black car, through the sunny morning. London was bright and clean and sparkling. There was some sort of military parade down the Mall and cars were jammed round the sides of the Palace. At the traffic lights, the sight-seers waited, mothers with children, pale young men in their first good suit, their first job, charwomen on their way home after the morning's cleaning, standing square on painful feet, corsets poking, mock leather shopping bags bulging. The breastplates and medieval plumes appeared, shining safe and proud above the hot, uncomfortable pavements; the charwomen smiled and pointed like children at a fair.

'Traffic gets worse every day,' the policeman grumbled.

The lights changed, the crowds began to move, the car slid into a side street. 'Here we are, Mrs. Prothero,' the policeman said.

It was dark inside the station, after the sun. Mary stumbled a little on the threshold, her mouth suddenly dry. The policeman's hand steadied her, guided her through a door into a small office with a high, barred window. There was a desk, a gas fire, surprisingly turned full on with a little cup of water in front of it like a votive offering, a chair which the

policeman pulled forward for her, close to the fire. 'If you wouldn't mind waiting a minute,' he said.

He went out. The room was silent as a cell and stiflingly hot. There was a smell of pine disinfectant. The heat from the gas fire scorched her legs. She moved the chair and it made an alarmingly loud sound on the polished floor.

A man dressed in ordinary clothes came in. He was thin, with a thin, dyspeptic, worried face and no air of authority at all. He didn't smile but seemed nervously disturbed like a clerk who has just found a mistake in a petty cash ledger. He offered Mary a cigarette from a metal case that looked as if it had been made for practice by an engineering apprentice, muttered, 'It's like a furnace in here,' and turned off the gas fire.

He sat down behind the desk and asked for her name, Johnny's name, their address. Then he frowned as if there was quite definitely a mistake; at least one and sixpence had been mislaid. He said, 'I'm sorry, Mrs. Prothero. Your husband has been involved in an accident.'

It didn't occur to her that it was an odd way to put it. She simply felt a blind surge of gratitude. 'Yes,' she said, 'of course it was an accident. If you like . . .'

The naked astonishment on his face stopped her.

'Have you heard, then?' he said, with what seemed ridiculous surprise.

'Heard what?'

'No, of course,' he said quickly. 'Of course you haven't. He paused, watching her with a curious, restrained diffidence. 'Your husband was travelling in a lorry with a man called Oakes. Did you know that?'

'Yes.' She looked at him, merely puzzled, half wondering if this was some kind of trap.

He said, 'There's been a bad accident. I'm sorry.'

SHE remembered that day and that night and the next three or four days only as a series of sharp images of landscapes and people's faces; the running, white horse glimpsed from the train, the child in the yellow dress perched on the level-crossing gate—so clearly and intensely remembered that they might have been the first horse, the first child she had ever seen, the factory chimneys fouling the hot, blue sky, the backs of small grey houses with their small, gallant gardens, the woman in the white apron hanging out her washing in an apple orchard; the faces of the people behind the rope that guarded the entrance to the quarry, the little boys, the idle and curious adults, and Lester's face, tighter and smoother and pinker than ever with distress and anxiety and, perhaps, annoyance. He had had to cancel a very important business engagement.

No one, it seemed afterwards, had at any point told her the story in one piece. She supposed that the main part of it must have come out at the inquest, though all that remained of that prolonged and tedious function was a sharp, physical memory that, in the course of it, the sweat had soaked down between her breasts like a cold, tickling insect and her hands had left wet marks on the back of the seat in front of her.

She heard it in snatches, some of them as meaningless at first as the stray bits of an abandoned jigsaw puzzle, but able to be fitted together in the end with only an occasional piece missing here or there, in the gentle, respectful rumble of a policeman's voice, the cold twang of an ambitious young reporter who had the initiative and the brazen ability to get past the Sister and visit Oakes in hospital, in the words of a man who pushed through an idle crowd to thrust his hand through the window of the hired car, into hers. He said, 'Your

husband's a brave man. We won't forget him here.' *His* voice was loud, slightly blurred by the fading effect of a lunch-time session in the pub, his manner one of assertive, self-imposed authority. Perhaps it set the key for the newspaper reports the next morning, most of which were highly coloured, over-imaginative, and to some extent untrue.

* * *

Len Oakes had been bound for Newcastle, not Liverpool. His mother's lie may have been due to ignorance or to an automatic habit of deception. Anyway, his journey was perfectly above-board though once they were clear of the Midlands he struck slightly west, curving north on minor roads, whether from a simple desire for scenic beauty or an even simpler one, to show that he was not bound by the official routing, no one knew. They had driven through the early evening and the night, stopping at a transport café where they bought a meal that Johnny didn't eat and a cup of coffee. He had never been in such a place before and Mary knew how he would have looked; his suit, the stiff, fair moustache proclaiming his separateness, glancing round him with a shy look in his golden eyes as if he wondered what he was doing there. He had asked for a telephone but they told him it was out of order, which wasn't true: the telephone was a private one in the owner's bungalow at the back of the café and his wife and children were asleep. After they left the place, Oakes had offered to stop at a call box but Johnny had told him that it didn't matter, he could telephone when they reached Newcastle.

He seemed sunk in apathy, hunched in his seat, sometimes answering Oakes when he spoke to him but more often not appearing to hear, just staring through the dark windscreen into the long, bright tunnel of the headlamps. Oakes had no idea what Johnny intended to do when they got to Newcastle, nor why he had left London. He said Johnny had 'acted a bit queer and vague' but Oakes lived in a world where people

were often in trouble and on the run and you didn't question your friends. Everyone was engaged, after all, in fighting a private battle in which society was the careless and implacable enemy. On the other hand, in spite of his term in prison, Oakes had not thought of Johnny as someone of his own sort at all. So that when he had burst into his mother's flat, Oakes had felt not only surprise but a certain pleasurable vanity. Not many people had ever asked Oakes for help. That the man who had turned to him was Johnny, not only loved and admired, but also seen, in a way, as one of the enemy, swelled his fancy and thrust him at once into a synthetically gallant role. Johnny's loyalty to his friends was bred in him like his bones and brain; Oakes's loyalty was a pale, celluloid copy but on this occasion it functioned in the same way. If Johnny wanted to go to Newcastle, he would take him without a word.

They went on through the night, a long drive, unremitting and chilly as they climbed up into the hills of County Durham. The route they took was lonely and dark. Mary thought it must have seemed to Johnny during those long hours that the journey would never end, and perhaps he no longer cared. He had not only lost his known, warm world, but he was himself lost. He had done something that was beyond the range his imagination could cope with and for which the consequences might well be so final and so terrible that he could not think of them. He had only tried once, and not very hard, to telephone Mary or the hospital, whichever had been uppermost in his mind. Perhaps he was quite sure Charles was dead, perhaps it hardly mattered. His action had been the same whatever the outcome; there was no consolation, no solution, he had come to the end not only of courage but of hope. He must have looked out of the cab through the grotesque misting on the windscreen and trembled inwardly at the raw morning as he saw what a savagely strange place the world was, how uncaringly bleak the air above the uncaring hills. He had come a long way to this cold dawn, this world that he

now found, solid, but without reality. Oakes said that when they stopped on the hill above the village, at the run-down shack advertising breakfasts, he groaned suddenly as he got down from the cab and said, 'Oh, my God.' Oakes had thought he was ill.

* * *

Lester and Mary saw the man who had given them breakfast. He was at the inquest, a great, shambling Welshman, so fat that his collar would not fasten and the flesh sagged like a pig's bladder above his partly fastened flies. He breathed like a rusty tin whistle, crippled by his body's failure; he had asthma as well as some glandular disease. His hands were white and soft like rolled feather cushions. They enclosed Mary's damply and briefly, at the entrance to the stiflingly small parish hall where the inquest had been held. She listened with dulled politeness in spite of Lester's fidgeting glances, while the Welshman mumbled something about being sorry; not many people called in, he went on in a tone of resentful surprise, as if he were regretting only the loss of a customer. 'And he didn't finish his bacon neither,' he mourned preposterously, 'a nice piece of long back, cut good and thick.'

Mary started to smile but his eyes stopped her, sad, and pleadingly human in the repellent armour of his flesh. He had given evidence at the inquest, she remembered now, about the brakes. They had talked about them over the tea and bacon, against a wireless turned up too loud so that the man had not heard the conversation very clearly. He thought Oakes had said there must be a leak somewhere in the hydraulic system but he had not seemed to think it particularly serious. The brakes held when you pumped them. 'I told them,' the man said—he had repeated this simple statement at fabulously tedious length in the witness box—'You can't be too careful of brakes, man.'

It was Johnny, he thought, who had crawled under the

lorry to look at the main cylinder but he did not know what was said when he emerged again because he had gone into the house to clear up the dishes and it was no business of his, anyway. Besides, there was a nasty little wind blowing, it was often like that in September, chilly and treacherous, and he had to be careful of his chest. As a matter of fact he was due at the clinic for a check up at nine-thirty and had a bit of tidying up to do before the hospital car called for him at nine. Mary frowned. This gratuitous piece of information seemed to ring a cold, warning bell in the corridors of her mind but she could not, immediately, see why. She steeled herself for some long, rambling account of ill health—Lester, wearing a controlled expression of stony impatience, had already moved off towards the waiting car—but what followed was worse.

‘He was a hero, girl, I’m telling you,’ he said, as he had already said at the inquest. Emotion was moist and maudlin in those little, imprisoned eyes, emotion of a most enjoyable kind. Mary was filled with a sudden, shamed revulsion.

* * *

They had both been brave—even Oakes. When he crawled out from under the lorry, Johnny said something was leaking, but he had thought, so Oakes maintained, that it would do until they got to a garage. The brakes had given when they were just over the brow of the hill. The road wound downwards through the cold, morning air, the end of the hill was out of sight.

Oakes didn’t panic. He said, ‘Jesus Christ, here’s a balls-up.’ He pumped the pedal and slammed into bottom gear. For the first bend, the gear held them, the next was steeper. They took it a fraction too fast for safety. Oakes was sweating into his eyes. With luck, though, the incline would flatten, there would be a run-in to a side road, a quarry.

Johnny said, ‘It must have been the main cylinder.’

‘Hang on, matey,’ Oakes said grimly, and rounded the next bend.

The whole country stretched out before them. The morning sun was misty over the scars of mines, over the grazing sheep, the grey, dreaming villages, the grey, dew-drenched grass.

'Oh my God,' said Oakes. 'Oh my Sweet Christ,' and then the vista narrowed, gave an illusion of safety as the road turned into the hill, a little rise, another bend.

'Run off the road,' Johnny shouted as the stony field opened on their left but Oakes was panicking now, frozen to the wheel, his reactions not trained to the voice of command, not a soldier; an undisciplined, blustering boy who could drop an old man and steal the sweet shop till but hadn't the nerve for action, not even to save his own skin.

The scream of the gear was frightening; a harsh, tearing, mechanical sound. The truck, rocking, came round the last bend into the straight run down. The village was off to the left of the road, safely, deeply in the valley, a small, grey, hideous village, the colour of slate. But fronting on the road itself was the parish school, dirty brick, corridors tiled like a public lavatory, windows like slits as if the place had been built to withstand a siege.

Oakes began to scream. 'For Christ's sake—get out.' Fear took him, he thrust at the door with his strong, young arms and was out, sprawling on the road, cracking down hard on his collar bone and breaking both legs above the knee. He didn't lose consciousness straight away. He saw the truck swerve, the open door crack and tear. Then Johnny must have been in the driver's seat because the truck was steady for a moment; for that short moment perhaps he thought he could get away with it, steer past the little school, down into the safety of the flat valley. But the lorry had too much momentum, it wasn't a risk to take. Half a mile before the school there was a quarry, empty and abandoned, with a steep run-in. With luck he might have done it; inside the quarry the ground rose sharply before it ended in sheer walls. The lorry hit a stone, tottered on two wheels as if in some ritual dance and

crashed on its side. He fell through the empty doorway and the lorry fell on top of him. It didn't kill him at once. By the time they found him, he was still alive, and crying. He died on the way to hospital.

* * *

'A hero,' the Welshman repeated. 'I can't get it out of my mind. All those kiddies in school—about that time they would have been singing their morning hymn.'

It was almost convincing. The children singing away, raucous-voiced, sweet or droning, to the thump *thump* of an old upright piano, innocently unaware behind the frail protection of old, crumbling brick, while the truck crashed down the hill towards them.

'What time was it?' Mary said suddenly. 'What time did they leave your place?'

He hedged a bit then as he had hedged in the witness box, not because he was a deliberate or even a natural liar but from some inherited, bardic desire not to pare the truth too fine and spoil a story. It wasn't much, after all, a few minutes here or there, his brass kitchen clock hadn't been seen to since his mother's day and was inclined to 'run fast' as he put it, but not so much; for his ordinary, day to day needs, it was a perfectly reliable guide. But there was the wireless, wasn't there? Mary persisted. Blaring so loud at breakfast that he had only heard a fraction of that conversation about the brakes? At that time of the day they announced the time at regular intervals and he would have listened, if he wanted to be ready for the hospital car at nine o'clock?

'Well . . . yêś,' he admitted grudgingly, less out of wariness than because it was a question that had not been put to him before and he suspected dimly that as it had not been asked, he hadn't been given his proper due. After all, he was the chief, indeed, the only witness. Apart from his account, there was only Oakes's statement, taken in hospital: no one had actually seen the accident. He looked at Mary morosely

Any slight alteration in his story had been harmless enough—who wouldn't, if they could, add a touch of colour to a drab picture? But if she wanted another answer, she could have it.

He told her and she looked through him as if he had suddenly vanished like a ghost or a dream. Then she smiled in a tired way and walked slowly to the car. A pudgy faced reporter latched onto the Welshman and moved him off persuasively, down the village street towards the pub.

* * *

The car moved off. Lester said uneasily, 'I only hope the papers don't make too much of it. It would be a pity. What was he doing in the lorry, after all? We don't want those sort of questions, what?'

'Does it matter?'

'For Martin's sake,' he said heavily. 'We don't want it splashed about that his father had been in prison, that he'd just tried to kill a man. It looks—as if he wasn't much better than a criminal on the run, don't y'know?'

Although he brought the words out boldly, his face was sweating. His eyes moved unhappily out of the window, avoiding hers.

'A terrible business,' he said breathily. 'Terrible.' But she saw he was torn. His grief had been real, even now his eyes leaked the occasional manly tear. But though he had seen Johnny, though he had drawn back the sheet and stared at him with shocked eyes, it was relief that informed his brain. A difficult situation had been averted, the family name had not been dirtied with failure but touched with honour; it was an easy way out, a fitting end.

A short while later, in the train, he settled into this attitude as comfortably as into his seat in the first-class dining-car. He watched Mary spread raspberry jam on a toasted bun and clumsily patted her hand as he said his prepared piece. It was a terrible business but there was some consolation, wasn't there, in pride? Perhaps not yet, naturally, she was too

shocked and upset, but later on. Martin would have a memory he could admire.

He thought she looked at him strangely. She was very pale, her eyes very dark and bright.

She said, 'It was all so pointless.'

'My poor girl. . . .' He felt very sorry for her and wished that he liked her better, that he didn't feel so uncomfortable beneath that sharp, measuring stare. He did his best. 'It wasn't really, y'know. He did a splendid thing. You heard what the coroner said? And a couple of women came up to me outside when I was waiting for you in the car. I wish you'd heard them. It was touching—really touching.' He was touched himself; he blew his nose.

She said, 'All right, he was brave. But there was no *point*. Do you know what time they left the top? It was twenty minutes past eight. There was no one in the school, *no one*. He was a liar, that old man. A story teller, rather. Carried away—it was such a good touch, wasn't it, the children singing in the school?' She looked at the utter disbelief on Lester's face. 'Didn't it occur to you? That someone—if it *had* been later—would have seen something, heard something?'

Lester said, 'They were singing. Nine o'clock, he said, didn't he? They wouldn't have heard.' He stirred uneasily, reached for his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. 'Everything's so damned noisy nowadays. D'you look up, every time you hear an aeroplane?'

He was alarmed by her expression. 'Mary dear. . . . He stopped, eyes straying, face pale and worried. 'It doesn't make any difference,' he said finally, 'not to—' he fumbled for the right words '—the final assessment, if you like. You can't think he had time to look at his watch? He just did the right thing without thinking—what counts is that he *did* it, you see. The courage . . .'

A phrase came into her head and she used it. 'Brave without purpose.'

'No,' Lester said uneasily.

'Yes.' She gave him an odd, twisted smile, she felt as if everything had twisted inside her. She hated herself, she hated Lester. She said wildly, 'Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die. . . .'

He frowned, he didn't like her smile. Up to now, though she had wept in the train going north, he *had been glad she* was 'sensible'. He could not have stood a woman deranged by grief. He could think of nothing to divert her from this odd, half-mad aberration except practical matters. Lighting a cigar, he spoke of them.

'There are one or two things we ought to get straight. First—you must not worry about money. I know you like to be independent, of course.'

Mary caught the censorious note in his voice and stiffened. 'I shall be all right,' she said instantly. 'There's the flat. I could sell it, I suppose, if Clara will let me. I shan't want to live there.'

'No, of course not.' He sighed, relieved. 'I'm glad you've decided to be sensible about that. But I hope you'll take advice. Don't rush bald-headed into anything. We'll get Rudge to go into it thoroughly, see what is the best thing to do. I daresay, properly invested, you can expect quite a decent little income, apart from capital gains. The market's going up at the moment.'

He examined the half inch of ash drooping from the end of his cigar. 'Another thing. Naturally—I shouldn't expect an answer to this suggestion straight away. You'll want to think it over. But we should be delighted, you know, to do our best for Martin. No—wait a minute. Look at it reasonably. You'll want to go on with your job'—he smiled indulgently—'you're a young woman.' He added delicately, 'Some day you will marry again. But until then, Martin needs security. The house is pretty empty. He can have a home with us if—when—it suits you. He's a fine boy.'

For a moment she was touched, she had never doubted his affection for Martin, she did not doubt his sincere intention

now. Then something—the eager hope, almost the lust, in his eye, made her aware his suggestion was monstrous.

She said, 'That's a mistake, isn't it, that's been made once already? How can you be so terribly irresponsible?'

He chose not to understand her, his cheeks puffed out with indignant astonishment. 'That's unfair, Mary. You know I'd do my level best for the boy.'

'Yes.'

He watched her cautiously. 'At least, let me help with the school bills. You can't deny me that. Let me see to his education. Johnny would have wanted him to go to his school. You know that, don't you?'

'Johnny's dead,' she said. 'I can look after Martin.'

She didn't hate Lester any more. She was only tired of him—infinately tired of his vast complacency, his insistent, confident investment in a dying world. Her England, she thought, was different from his, an England of small gardens, suburban streets, the grammar school and the scholarship, the safe perspective of people who expected nothing, only the small security that lay in their own hands, their own brains. Even when Johnny's world had excited her most, the beauty and freedom of a life that included Fitchet and the confident inheritance of the earth, even when she had been most aware that it was better than the boring, otiose suburbs, the limited visions, the limited minds—even *then* his world had seemed unsafe to her, a perilous dream that could so easily turn life into a slow, sad decline. 'No, Lester,' she said. 'He's my son.'

'I'm not doubting it,' he said, half humorously, getting a good grip on himself, determining not to be angry. 'My dearest girl, let's get one thing straight. I'm not trying to buy your boy. If it's me you object to, that's fair enough. I'll admit we haven't always seen eye to eye. But leave me out of it for a minute. I'll admit something else, if you like. I want him. I like children—I only had one son—and I love Martin. If you don't want to let me have him, I understand *that*. But you mustn't let the boy suffer. I'd never

forgive myself. Would you consider another suggestion? Two others, as a matter of fact. I spoke to Clara last night. She wants, if you will agree to it, to set up some kind of trust fund for Martin. Not much, she's not a rich woman, but enough to give him a decent start. Of course she'll put all this to you much better than I could, but let it stand. And the other thing is that I telephoned Sandlewood. I had to do that, the boy's due back next week, and I thought you'd probably want to be with him for a bit. I know that was none of my business but I wanted to take some of the practical arrangements off your shoulders. Call me an interfering old fool if you like. Anyway—the upshot was this. Sandlewood was very upset. He thought a lot of Johnny. He says the school will be willing to take Martin, without fees, for the rest of his time there. . . .’

She listened to his kind, emphatic voice. There was good sense in it, and a corroding gentleness. She was lulled, almost persuaded and then she suddenly saw what he was doing—saw the whole marvellous machinery of that kind of life, geared to take Martin in on the production line, smooth him, polish him, finish him, coax him along with prizes and silver cups and awards for gallantry, only to present him at the end with nothing but an unattainable dream. The kind of dream that had flowered for Johnny just once, perhaps, high in the sky above the Mohne dam; a dream of courage and high endeavour that withered, in the end, in the presence of a world that neither understood nor wanted it; a dream that had whispered once more, she hoped—hoped with all her heart—in those seconds before he crashed into the quarry, face to face, at the last, with a situation that could use his capacity for sacrifice.

‘No,’ she said. ‘No, Lester. You’re very kind. I . . .’

But there was nothing she could say. She left it there.

He thought her pig-headed, a fool. She could see the consciousness dawning, during the rest of the train journey, of how she had always irritated him. They parted at the station, shaking hands, expressing good will. Lester went off to his

club to dine alone, drink a good brandy with a friend after dinner, smoke a cigar. It was unlikely that they would ever be alone together again and his relief was apparent in his quick, aggressive stride as he walked away from her into a tobacconist's shop to buy a box of Havanas, a pipe—perhaps only a re-fill for his lighter.

She watched him until he disappeared into the shop and then walked slowly towards the tube station. She felt lonely, insecure, and that she had behaved foolishly for no reason except a wishy-washy kind of principle that had its foundation only in an emotional desire to drive out her own terrible sense of failure. Then, gradually, as she walked, she became conscious of her body, of its straight, sturdy strength planted firmly on the balls of her feet. She breathed deeply, holding herself very upright, and began to walk more quickly. By the time she came to the tube station, she was almost running. She did run down the stairs.

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